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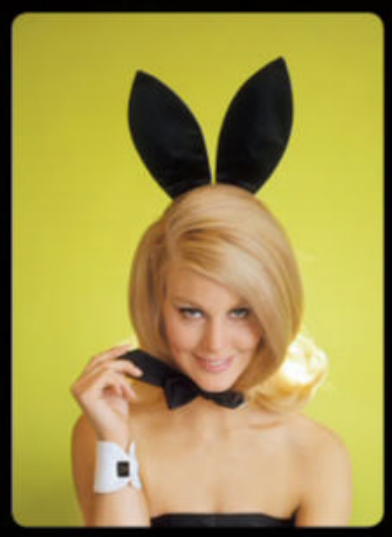

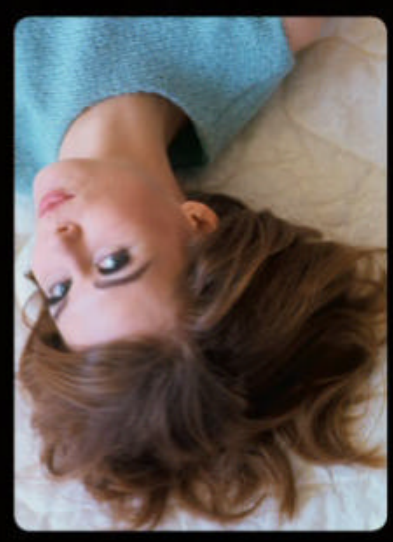

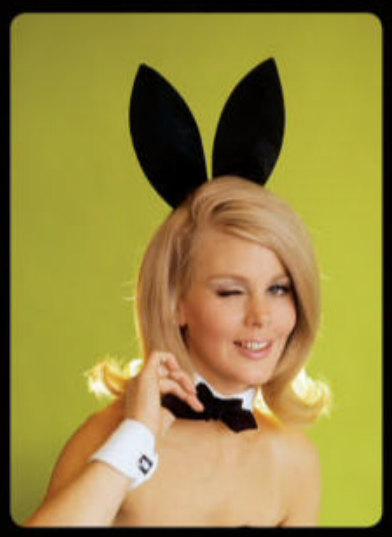

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Edwidge Danticat

Newly discovered words from the late, great Maya Angelou are in good hands with novelist Danticat: One of the first English-language books she read after moving to the U.S. from Haiti at the age of 12 was Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. "She never allowed racist, sexist, homophobic or other kinds of demeaning talk in her presence," Danticat says of the subject of our *Heritage* feature *A Phenomenal Woman*. "We can be free to speak and not destroy others with our tongues."

Jesse Hyde

t: *@jessehyde7*

In *When Spirituality Goes Viral*, the Salt Lake City–based journalist delves into the life of spiritual leader Bentinho Massaro, whose rhetoric some believe incited a suicide. "Historically, a cult leader was limited by geography and traditional social networks," says Hyde. "Today, dangerous ideas spread more quickly thanks to social media, which is built for bingeing. That's scary, but it's an open question whether a cult can really take off entirely online."

Kimou Meyer

i: *@groteskito*

Over the past 20 years, Kimou Meyer, a.k.a. Grotesk, a Swiss-born graphic designer, has become a player in New York's underground, drawing on his classical training and outsider perspective. His illustration of a Rabbit sculpture in honor of PLAYBOY's 65th anniversary is the rare cartoon that requires no caption. "Like most masterpieces, PLAYBOY, and by extension the Rabbit, has only gained value since its controversial beginnings," Meyer notes.

Blaise Cepis

i: *@itsalrightwerealright*

There's nothing new about capturing images of nude women, but when a photographer introduces a trampoline into the equation, elevation ensues. Enter Cepis's *Free Form,* a delightfully disorienting pictorial of "seemingly flying and levitating" models. This contribution from the Philly-born artist is a "literal interpretation of freedom," he says. "They are free of location, free of time, free even of gravity—it's like skinny-dipping in the sky."

Chuck Palahniuk

t: *@chuckpalahniuk*

"I'm always proud to show up in the pages of PLAYBOY," says Palahniuk. Since 2000 he has contributed more than a dozen pieces, including "a feature about farm-equipment demolition derbies in the 50th anniversary issue, which shockingly seems like just last year." In his short story *Repercussions,* he explores how far a mother will go to protect her son. Palahniuk's latest project, the graphic novel *Fight Club 3,* launches as a 12-part series starting in January.

Sarah Maxwell

i: *@sarahmaxwellart*

When reading the five *Playboy Symposium* essays to inspire her accompanying artwork, illustrator Maxwell (who also provided the NSFW visuals for *Dirty Talk*) was struck by Christopher Stroop's piece on bad-faith arguments regarding free speech and religion. "Being an openly lesbian artist, I want to create a platform for the community to be seen and normalized," the Paris-based Texas native says. "Love is something everyone can relate to, regardless of gender."

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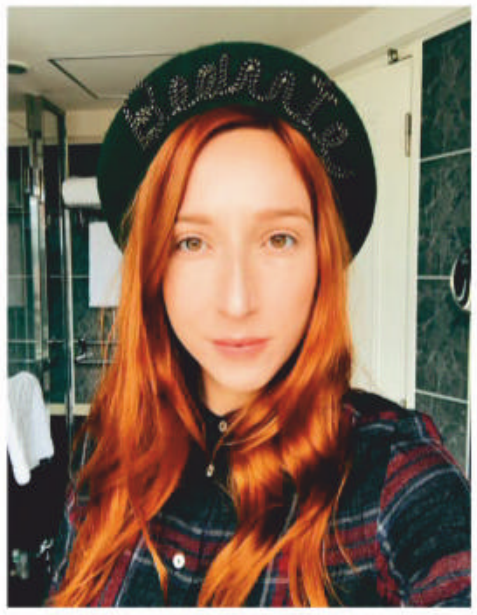
Natasha Wilson

i: *@deanastacia*

With her trademark dreamy, surrealist lens, Wilson captures the complex women of *A New Wave*, inspired by nostalgic ideals of journalism. "It's not about sexuality as much as it's about freedom and confidence. It's not about skin so much as expressing yourself," she says. "I try to carry that energy and message through everything I do. Whether they're clothed or nude, as long as I'm conveying that message of liberation, that's all that matters."



Ryan Pfluger

i: *@ryanpfluger*

Bradley Cooper, Meryl Streep, Angelina Jolie and now Ezra Miller and Roxane Gay: Pfluger brings his inimitable point of view to each of his subjects. "Identifying as queer and having a mostly queer crew changes the environment and how a subject reacts or embraces that," he says. The shoot with Miller "came together in a very collaborative way. He's a unique individual with a fluidity in gender expression."

Stormy Daniels

t: *@StormyDaniels*

Director, porn star, author...American superhero? Since early 2018, Daniels has elevated herself from potential media casualty to cultural icon in the making. "Whatever it is you choose to do with your life, fuck everyone else, as long as you can face yourself in the mirror," she says. In *The Art of the Real*, photographer Sasha Samsonova captures Daniels's raw honesty in a Helmut Newton–inspired pictorial, amplified by Sloane Crosley's essay.

Riki Blanco

i: *@rikiblanco*

Madrid-based illustrator Blanco drew from his own experience to craft a piece for *Red Tide Rising,* Adam Skolnick's essay on American socialism. He also created the art for Chuck Palahniuk's *Repercussions*. "Everything is party, confetti, diversity, respect, community," he says of his creative process. On addressing free speech in a challenging political climate: "My work is almost always allegorical. Fortunately for artists, ambiguity gives us some leeway."

Eric Powell

t: *@goonguy*

Writer and artist Powell's much-revered comic book series *The Goon* turns 20 this year. He created the latest installment, *The Goon in the Maltese Bunny*, exclusively for our pages. The stand-alone piece pays homage to our iconic Rabbit—and marks Powell's PLAYBOY debut. The Eisner Award–winning Nashville native is bringing his ever-evolving series back to its original publisher, Albatross Funnybooks, with a new issue out in March.

Taylor Ferber

i: *@talktometaylor*

"Don't underestimate the intelligence of a woman who reveals her body," says Ferber, a red-carpet journalist known for her celebrity interviews shot with a selfie stick and featured on her vlog, *Talk to Me*. She's also the coalescing force behind *A New Wave,* our revealing look at Ferber and five contemporaries that challenges clichéd notions of "smart professional women." Ferber says: "How we express ourselves shouldn't be defined by anyone but us."

Historical/Alamy Stock Photo; p. 227 courtesy Playboy Archives, Kai Mort Shuman/Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images, Michael Ochs Archives/Stringer/Getty Images; page 234 courtesy Playboy Archives; inside back cover courtesy Playboy Archives. Pp. 125, 232 illustrations by Neryl Walker. Pp. 14–16 styling by Jill Vincent, makeup and hair by Bree Stanchfield; pp. 28–31 prop styling by Jordan Rudd; pp. 34–35 grooming by Bree Stanchfield; pp. 43–50 grooming by Bree Stanchfield; pp. 72–83, 87 model Vendela at Photogenics, styling by Ali Dariotis, hair and makeup by Sara Cranham; pp. 96–101 photography by Micaiah Carter at GIANT Artists, styling by Jason Bolden at TACK artist group, hair by Tym Wallace at Mastermind MGT, LLC, makeup by Ashunta Sheriff at Mastermind MGT, LLC, prop styling by Justin Fry; pp. 102–107 models Priscilla Bass, Jorlenne Caraballo, Magne, and Maggie White, styling by Emily Dawn Long, hair and makeup by Stefania Costanzo, produced by Hannah Kinlaw, line produced by Naim Naif; pp. 112–116 hair and makeup by Bree Stanchfield; pp. 126–137, 141 model Megan Moore at Frank Model Management, styling by Kelley Ash; pp. 7, 152–159 grooming by Carissa Ferreri; pp. 6, 172–183 model Miki Hamano at Frank Model Management, styling by Kelley Ash, hair and makeup by Bree Stanchfield; pp. 160–165 styling by Kelley Ash, makeup and hair by Sara Cranham, Madeline North and Bree Stanchfield, prop styling by Meghan Czerwinski; pp. 192–197 styling by Kelley Ash, makeup and hair by Bree Stanchfield; pp. 200–204 model Taya Vais, makeup and hair by Elza Ferrari and Julia Adam, wardrobe and set styling by Sofiya Urbán.

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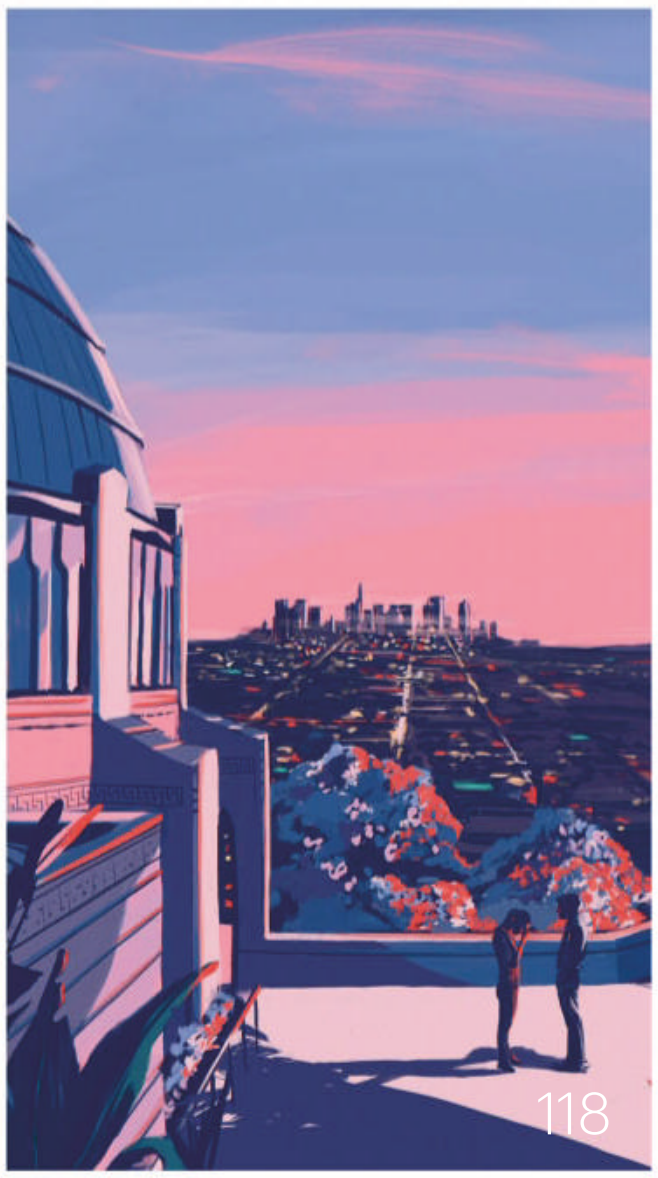
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PLAYBOY

SPRING / SUMMER 2019

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

To our readers:

Welcome to PLAYBOY's 65th anniversary issue—a 234-page celebration of who we were, who we are and how we're changing.

PLAYBOY launched in 1953 to a country booming with postwar prosperity and optimism. Our first issue hit newsstands on the heels of the Kinsey Reports. The sexual revolution of the 1960s was almost a decade away. PLAYBOY was *the* platform for leading writers, artists and photographers to express themselves with total freedom, the place where sex was never taboo and where life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were to be enjoyed by all.

But the world has changed in unimaginable ways in the 65 years since our first issue. Much that was taboo then is mainstream now. How can PLAYBOY keep pushing boundaries and make a difference in 2019? By continuing to grow.

Consider this a new beginning—and a work in progress. Today, we strive to be more inclusive, stretching and redefining tired and frankly sexist definitions of beauty, arousal and eroticism. We're committed to the democratization of pleasure, which means we're steadfastly sex-positive, and we'll fight abuse, harassment and discrimination in all its forms. Building awareness for gender equality and sexual health issues, advocating for civil rights and speaking out for the public good are not just complementary but intrinsic to PLAYBOY's purpose. This issue represents our vision of the world, a place for everybody and every *body* to experience delight, surprise and joy. After all, freedom is meaningless if it's enjoyed by only a privileged few.

With that vision in mind, we're keeping what works—what's truly in our DNA—and building from there. We'll continue to introduce new voices throughout our pages, in front of the camera and behind it. Our pictorials will remain as bold and provocative as ever. This work will be produced by an editorial staff that today is more than 50 percent women.

In the pages of our first quarterly you'll find neuroscientist-philosopher Sam Harris and cultural gadfly Roxane Gay. You'll learn about punk rock in Myanmar and an entrepreneur using cryptocurrency to help sex workers get paid. You'll see Stormy Daniels in a new light and visit the bars in America that have become unwitting sanctuaries of the alt-right. Adding their viewpoints to the issue are luminaries like Taraji P. Henson, Ezra Miller, Edwidge Danticat, Sloane Crosley, Marius Sperlich, Chuck Palahniuk, Blaise Cepis and Trevor Paglen.

Sixty-five years ago we started a conversation about sex, pleasure and freedom. The forces we fought against back then—repression, silence and fear—have not gone away. And as one of the most critical thought leaders in the room for well over half a century we believe that now is the perfect time to take the conversation further.

Join us.

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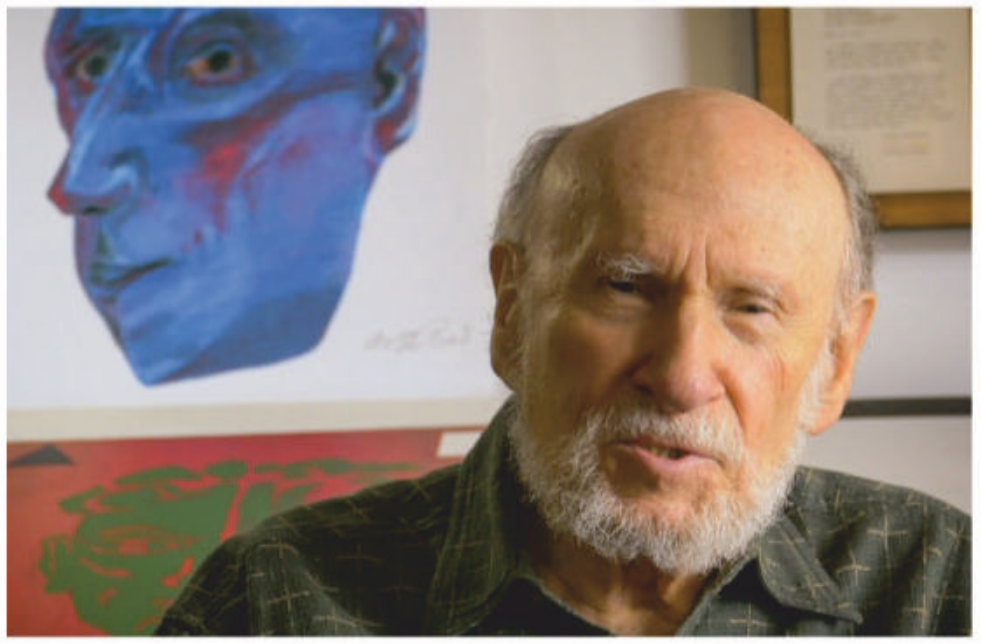
BUENOS DÍAS

Our Rabbit traveled to the Vegas Strip in November for Playboy's 2018 Día de los Muertos Party at Tao Las Vegas. The celebration, which followed a slew of Playboy Halloween-related festivities across the globe—including at Playboy clubs in London and New York—was hosted by Playmates Carly Lauren, Stephanie Branton, Gia Marie, Kristy Garett, Cassandra Dawn and Shauna Sexton, who danced the night away in flower crowns and Coco de Mer lingerie, with the help of DJ Vice.

SPOOKY SPIRITS

Playboy Club London's annual Halloween bash served as the official launchpad for the Gothic Gin Garden, a six-week-long pop-up presented in association with Tanqueray. At the Bunny-hosted preview, Keyholders customized gin and tonics with accoutrements plucked from a "sprig wall" amid a fairy tale–themed "botanical gin garden."

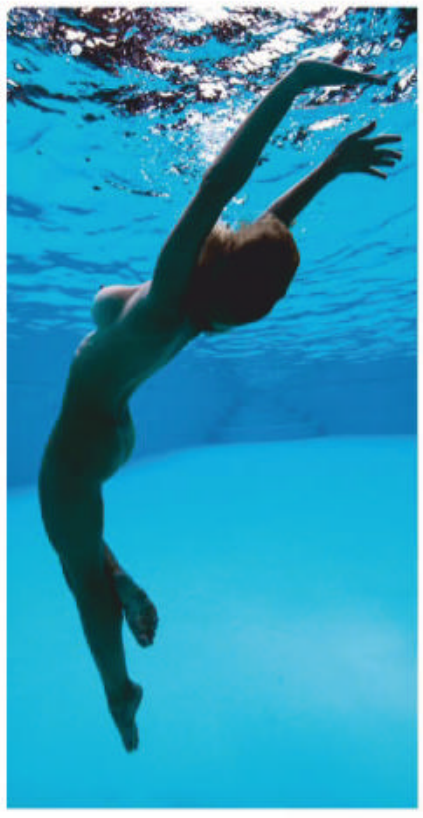


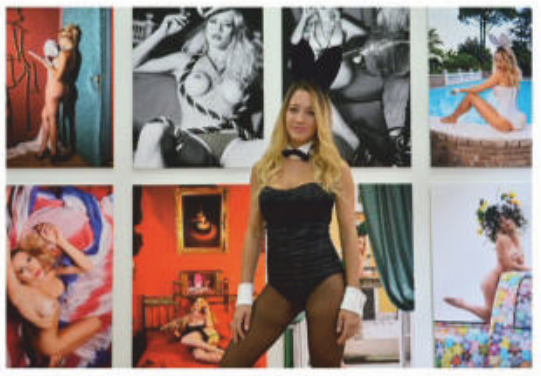
WORK OF ART

PLAYBOY's founding art director is the subject of a new documentary, *Art Paul of Playboy: The Man Behind the Bunny*, which offers a rare look at the late icon's career, including his 30-year tenure at PLAYBOY. Interweaving archival footage and conversations with artists, colleagues, Hugh Hefner and Paul himself, the film, per director Jennifer Hou Kwong, "presents a serious and creative part of PLAYBOY in a positive light that has never been done before." Not long after the doc's premiere at the Chicago Film Festival, Chicago gallery One After 909 debuted RaceFace, an exhibition of imagined faces based on Paul's observations about race and prejudice from his perspective as a Jewish man.

UNCOVERED

To bring to life the theme of our 65th anniversary issue—is freedom of expression absolute in our country?—we tapped 27-year-old internet sensation and art director Marius Sperlich. This marks the first time in 19 years that PLAYBOY has commissioned a visual artist for our cover, and we couldn't be more pleased with the result: Sperlich's macrophotography imbues an undoubtedly American cultural moment with the ironies and injustices surrounding free expression and censorship in the United States. Phases of Sperlich's creative process appear above. "Change is in the air as a new generation of ideas takes hold," he says. "Demonstrations are the embodiment of unity—people banding together from all walks of life for a cause. The censored nipple functions as the poster child for a much broader problem of social injustice, and our protestors want to know: Is this *really* the land of the free?"





WITH LOVE FROM ITALY

One year after Hugh Hefner's death, we paused to celebrate our founder's life in true Playboy style. On September 27 in Milan, *Playboy Italy* Playmate Giulia Borio unveiled *Caro Amico Ti Scrivo,* or "Dear friend, I write to you," an exhibit of 27 large-format images by photographer Carlo Mari.

COCO, DO YOU LOVE ME?

We'd like to take a moment to thank British lingerie brand Coco de Mer for styling the Playmates at our Día de los Muertos event (opposite page). In January, the brand launches its latest collaboration with us: Playboy by Coco de Mer. Each piece pays homage to a past issue of PLAYBOY. See more at coco-de-mer.com.

Cryptocurrency hasn't been the sexiest tech craze—but that's about to change. Meet the woman hoping to modernize (and protect) the transactional relationship

JANICE GRIFFITH

BY **LINA ABASCAL**

Janice Griffith, an AVN Awards best actress nominee and co-founder of SpankChain, a start-up that aims to make sex work safer via blockchain technology, is no manic pixie porn girl. Along with her political activism (she promotes the decriminalization of sex work alongside Sex Workers Outreach Project), her vocal opposition to racism in the adult industry (she's an outspoken critic of marketing that fetishizes nonwhite performers) and her entrepreneurship (in June she launched Fleshlight's first-ever "medium-toned" toy), her passion remains having sex on camera and being paid for it.

And much of what the 23-year-old New York native does online and off is geared toward protecting her right to do so. That includes her current efforts to resolve the dangers now facing sex workers in the United States following passage of the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act. A set of anti-trafficking bills signed into law by the president last April, FOSTA-SESTA gives officials the right to police websites that host advertisements for sex work, effectively equating illegal sex trafficking with consensual sex for pay.

Assistant Attorney General Stephen Boyd, on behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice, released a memo stating that a certain provision of FOSTA may be unconstitutional and that the act "is broader than necessary because it [extends] to situations where there is minimal federal interest, such as to instances in which an individual person uses a cell phone to manage local commercial sex transactions involving consenting adults." Pro–free speech groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union, have come out in opposition to the legislation, saying it drastically weakens protections against internet censorship. And by censoring and criminalizing the presence of sex workers, Griffith argues, FOSTA-SESTA removes their ability to vet potential clients, creating more risk within an already marginalized population.

"Policing women's bodies and what we can do for money is a huge problem we're constantly facing," says Griffith. "I know sex workers who have died or gone missing because they lost access to screening services. How far can FOSTA-SESTA overreach? What will it lay the precedent for?"

It's important to note that Griffith doesn't differentiate between adult performers and other sex workers. Some inside the adult industry perceive a pecking order in which they place themselves higher than those who exchange money for intimate sexual activity. Griffith laughs that off, saying, "We're all whores to them." That's what prompted her to engage the adult industry with the tech community in a way that doesn't simply monetize but protects. Primarily she wants to create safer options for reliable financial transactions.

"Right now, models want to accept money and people want to give us money, but there's no way to make that happen," she says. "My Cash App was shut down, and for what reason?" The answer, of course, is that sex workers are not a protected group within the United States, allowing payment processors to discriminate against them and the services they provide. At the federal level, selling your body falls within the same legal and financial category as selling marijuana. Most FDIC-insured banks can't touch the money.

Enter SpankChain. "Cryptocurrency has the potential to give us more agency with what we do," Griffith explains. Founded in 2017 by a team of six that includes Griffith, a UX designer, a software developer and a self-described "Russian hacker," SpankChain aims to "create the infrastructure for pornographers and sex workers to accept cryptocurrency in a safe way" by using a blockchain network called Ethereum. (That means users trade not in Bitcoin but in a currency called ether.) The start-up has gained the attention of *Forbes,* and CoinDesk, an outlet that covers the cryptocurrency market, has applauded its efforts to keep transaction fees low for its users. "The smartest thing you can do is be financially independent of platforms like PayPal, Venmo, Square," says Griffith. For her, the blockchain, while largely discounted by Wall Street as the nebulous Wild West of banking, may be the key to economic freedom for sex workers.

• • •

Formerly a girl of the Warped Tour persuasion, Griffith entered porn about five years ago. Early on, she had purple hair, multiple body and facial piercings and gauged ears. Her hair is now natural and her ears sewn up, yet she still labels herself "alternative" based on how the industry she works in handles her racial ambiguity. "I'm half white, half Indian," she says matter-of-factly. "They can't pigeonhole my ethnicity. Every scene I shoot is interracial." She'll have sex with performers of all races and ethnicities but refuses to participate in scenes promoted as interracial, a porn category that generally features sex between whites and blacks. She also refuses to participate in certain scenes depicting workplace relationships or unfair power dynamics. "The plot matters. It's so high-concept now," she says. "We're not just having sex."

Griffith's passion for porn has gotten her into plenty of trouble. She has been either banned or deleted from Twitter and Instagram at various points in her career. In response to her love for pornography, trolls often taunt, "Imagine what her dad thinks." ("My dad loves me unconditionally," she counters.) Still, none of this has made Griffith want to step away from the adult industry. Rather, she hopes to continue establishing herself as a respectable voice within her chosen field, with no ulterior motives involving breaking free, crossing over or moving on. She won't be pushed out. If the industry loses her, it will be because she wanted to leave. In the meantime, Griffith isn't hell-bent on impressing you. But if you pay attention, she may do so anyway. ■

STYLING BY JIL VINCENT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **KAYLA VARLEY**

DIRTY TALK

The way we speak about sex has always been, shall we say, nuanced. Here, our Playboy Advisor offers a study of numbers and nomenclature related to the lewdest lexicon in the English language. **(No offense)**

WORDS *of* ADVICE

Sexting can increase

satisfaction among couples who are casually dating or having casual sex.

Sexting has a less positive impact on people in very committed relationships,

however,

according to a 2015 study by Drexel University researchers.

“FUCK TRUMP!

CBS bleeped both words in Robert De Niro’s speech at the 2018 Tony Awards.

COMING *or* CUMMING?

“‘Cum’ is not a word. We don’t have three-letter alternate spellings for other four-letter words that have double meanings. You wouldn’t write ‘I want to suk his dik.’” —*Dan Savage*

[*Playboy’s Copy Chief agrees; in addition, cock ring, blow job, butt plug and doggy style are all rendered as two words, not one.*]

14TH CENTURY

widely accepted date of *fuck*’s first publication

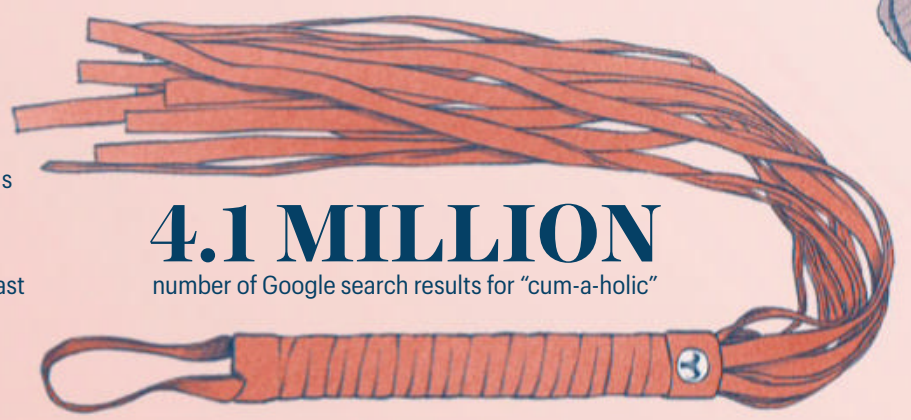
1664

first printed reference to pussy in a sexual context

DON’T SAY A WORD

RED PINEAPPLE **VANILLA**
UNICORN **KELLY CLARKSON** HUFFLEPUFF

terms listed in a 2018 survey of the most popular safe words used during kinky sex, as reported by sex-toy maker Lovehoney



CUNT 5 WAYS

GROPECUNTELANE a street name in London’s supposed red-light district, circa 1230

KUNTA *Cunt*’s Old Nordic origin word, meaning women’s genitals, per the *Oxford English Dictionary*

KUNTHI Sanskrit for female genitalia

KUNTI paternal aunt of the Hindu god Krishna

“I GUESS THAT **CUNT** GETTING EATEN” —lyrics in Azealia Banks’s 2011 hit “212”

Sneeze in her satchel

Great Depression–era slang for cunnilingus

Icing expert

World War II–era slang for blow job enthusiast

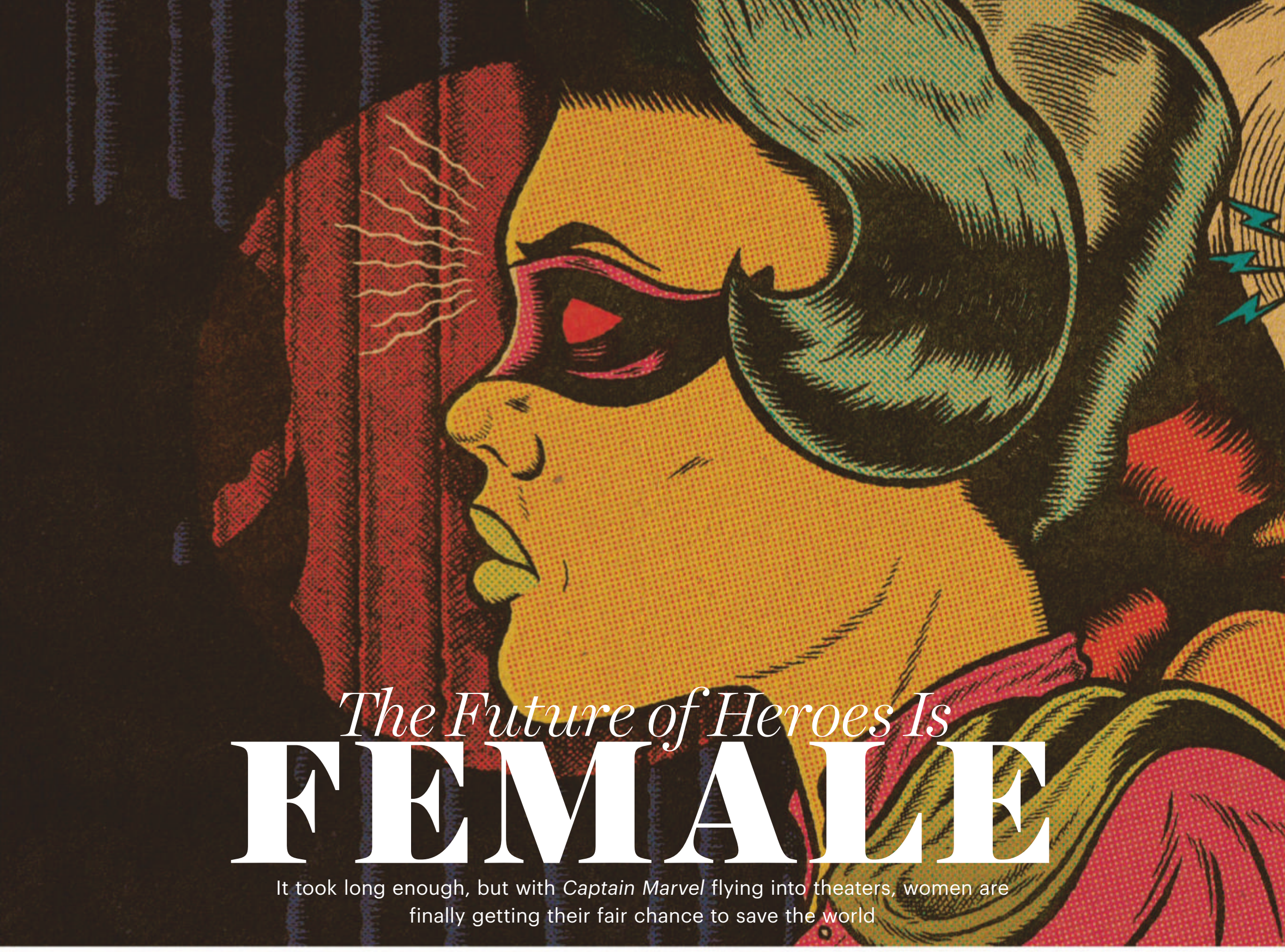
Eating pound cake

World War II–era slang for anilingus

4.1 MILLION

number of Google search results for “cum-a-holic”

BY **ANNA DEL GAIZO**
ILLUSTRATIONS BY **SARAH MAXWELL**



The Future of Heroes Is FEMALE

It took long enough, but with *Captain Marvel* flying into theaters, women are finally getting their fair chance to save the world

BY **ERIC DUCKER**

When director Rachel Talalay went to San Diego Comic-Con in 1995 to promote her film *Tank Girl,* based on a British comic about a superpower-less woman who, well, drives a tank, the fest was a fraction of the spectacle it is today. Back then, the event was a more honest celebration of comic books, with far less coopting by studios looking to push their movies and TV shows. That's mostly because movies and TV shows based on comic books were rare. According to Talalay, who now directs for television on shows including *The Flash* and *Supergirl,* another crucial difference between Comic-Con of the 1990s and Comic-Con today was how few women filed inside the convention center. "When I took *Tank Girl* there, I brought in this female audience who had nothing," Talalay says. "The only women in Comic-Con were the booth babes."

Tank Girl ultimately flopped. Talalay blames executives who, she says, pushed her out of the editing process and turned the film into something nonsensical. Two decades later, much has changed in the comics-based entertainment ecosystem, as exemplified by the March release of *Captain Marvel*—the first film from the Marvel Cinematic Universe to have a female lead. Set in the 1990s, it follows Carol Danvers, an Air Force pilot with special powers who gets embroiled in an intergalactic war. Heading into its release, the film has unprecedented momentum and appeal. *Avengers: Infinity War* ended with a wallop, and it's clear Danvers and her alter ego will play a substantial role in cleaning up Thanos's cosmic trauma in the fourth *Avengers* installment, scheduled for May. *Captain Marvel* also has the opportunity to prolong the hot streak Marvel Studios has achieved in its so-called "phase three," with the critical and commercial successes of *Black Panther, Thor: Ragnarok* and *Spider-Man: Homecoming.* And with the ascendant Brie Larson in the lead role, *Captain Marvel* is the first Marvel Studios film headlined by an Oscar winner. "It's going to be one of the biggest movies of the year," says Paul Dergarabedian, a senior analyst at comScore, a leading media analytics company. "It's no question."

Such confidence in a female-led film is a new phenomenon in Hollywood, especially within Marvel Studios and its corporate parent, Disney, which bought the company in 2009. Over the course of 10 years and 20 Marvel Studios movies, female superheroes have served as supporting players (the *Avengers* and *Guardians of the Galaxy* series) or shared equal billing in a sequel (*Ant-Man and the Wasp*). DC Films and Warner Bros. haven't done much better in their decades-long partnership. Warner has released seven live-action films about Batman, six about Superman and one about them fighting each other. It wasn't until 2017 that the studio finally put out its first stand-alone female superhero movie, *Wonder Woman.*

Wonder Woman didn't just collect more than $800 million at the global box office; it positioned the studio—whether intentionally or not—at the forefront of a culture-defining moment, one informed by the 2016 election and, to be more insular, a lack of enthusiasm for *Batman* post–Christopher Nolan. "*Wonder Woman* had a particular resonance among female viewers, and even male viewers who wanted their daughters to be inspired by her character," Dergarabedian says, perhaps referring to the fact that the film inspired

ILLUSTRATION BY **YOUR CINEMA**

women-only viewings across the country, as well as one of the most popular Halloween costumes of 2017.

With *Wonder Woman,* DC Films finally delivered to a movie audience that, nationally, is becoming less male and less white. "We've known for years that fandom has become more inclusive, more diverse and, frankly, more feminine than ever," says Matthew Smith, a professor at Radford University and author of *Critical Approaches to Comics.* The record-breaking box office tallies of both *Black Panther* and *Wonder Woman* prove Smith's assertion. "The reality that you would market only products that are tailored to an audience of white males is surprising," Smith continues. "There's more money available to you. Why are you not going after that money?"

For comic book enthusiasts, the answer is clearly that for so long, Hollywood didn't know the formula. Aside from *Tank Girl, Catwoman* and *Elektra,* both commercial flops, were released within six months of each other between 2004 and 2005. Halle Berry's and Jennifer Garner's films failed for various reasons, including, respectively, divorcing *Catwoman* from the *Batman* universe and creating a *Daredevil* spin-off that no one wanted.

Their poor showings (*Catwoman* made $40 million domestically and *Elektra* $24 million) justified to film executives that they needn't invest in movies about female superheroes, and that line of thinking prevailed for more than a decade.

But Dergarabedian likes to counter that dry-era theory by noting the precedent of commercially successful female-led action movies predating *Wonder Woman.* He cites Sigourney Weaver's portrayal of Ripley in the early *Alien* movies and, more recently, Jennifer Lawrence in *The Hunger Games* franchise, the first film of which established March as a reliable month for launching blockbusters. Following her 2015 performance in *Mad Max: Fury Road,* Charlize Theron starred in *Atomic Blonde,* which completed her evolution into a bankable action heroine after *Aeon Flux*'s 2005 failure. Scarlett Johansson carried Luc Besson's sci-fi action flick *Lucy* to almost $500 million worldwide in 2014. And yet, for almost a decade, Johansson's Marvel character remained a supporting player. That will change soon; Marvel green-lit a *Black Widow* stand-alone film last year.

When *Black Widow* debuts, it will be the directorial work of Australian filmmaker Cate Shortland. Her hiring is an example of how, in the midst of Time's Up, female inclusiveness is finally registering on both sides of the camera. *Catwoman* and *Elektra* were both directed by men; *Wonder Woman* clearly benefited from the vision of Patty Jenkins, who is directing its sequel, *Wonder Woman 1984. Captain Marvel* also has a female director (albeit as half of a husband-and-wife team, Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck), and six of its seven credited screenwriters are women.

Even with all the goodwill, *Captain Marvel* isn't a sure bet. For one, outside comic book fan circles, the Air Force pilot is a largely unknown figure—as is an earlier incarnation, Ms. Marvel—even though she has been around in various forms since the 1970s. But optimists would argue that this lack of familiarity could work to the film's advantage. After all, does anyone need to see Bruce Wayne's parents die yet again? *Captain Marvel* might make you actually give a damn about the Kree or the fact that the hero glows in the trailers like she's tripping on ayahuasca. It also might make you wonder what took so long. ■

Trevor Paglen stands beneath Prototype for a Nonfunctional Satellite (Design 4; Build 4)—a predecessor of Orbital Reflector—at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.

Man in His DOMAIN

TREVOR PAGLEN

With *Orbital Reflector,* the artist has created one of the first-ever space sculptures. What it reflects might change the way you view the cosmos—and your fellow earthlings

BY **ZACH SOKOL**

"There's no such thing as a civilian space program, and there never will be," Trevor Paglen says with a resigned laugh. It's early October, and we're talking in an office at New York University's AI Now Institute, where the 44-year-old is an Artist Fellow. But lately he's been spending time in Nevada, working on one of humankind's first works of fine art to be displayed in the infinite gallery of space.

Space is having a moment, in ways Paglen finds both troubling and inspiring: Elon Musk has launched a SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket equipped with a Tesla; more than 600 customers have paid upward of $200,000 each for a seat on Virgin Galactic's commercial spaceflight; President Trump has announced his so-called Space Force (designed to ensure "American dominance in space"). Just as it was in the 20th century, modern space exploration is a springboard for nationalistic myth-making. But Paglen—a 2017 MacArthur Fellow and geography Ph.D. known for "showing what invisibility looks like" by documenting classified reconnaissance satellites, National Security Agency listening stations, weapons test sites and other clandestine structures—sees space exploration through a different lens: Space is entirely a "weaponized" place as far as we earthlings are concerned, and all recent advancements in the industry are outgrowths of the Cold War.

"When we're looking at spaceflight," he says, "it has everything to do with military and other attempts to exert power over the planet from that high ground, whether that's surveillance, targeting or delivering weapons."

Take Sputnik. As much as it was a testament to human ingenuity, it was also a demonstration of the Soviet Union's ability to shuttle a nuclear weapon to the other side of the planet. The same arguably goes for SpaceX today: That intergalactic Tesla was essentially "an advertisement" aimed at the military, implicitly marketing the Falcon Heavy rocket as a cargo carrier that can lug much more than an electric car—a payload filled with surveillance satellites, for example. In fact, it was widely reported that SpaceX's Falcon 9 launched a government-owned payload into an undisclosed orbit on a January 2018 trip.

"The market that drives the creation of launch vehicles is a military market," Paglen says, one that "SpaceX is very actively trying to break into, and *has* broken into." The artist adds, "It's telling a different story than [competitor] Lockheed," but it's gunning for the same contracts.

Call it Orbital Realism: Space travel is inextricable from the military-industrial complex. So how can an artist hold up a mirror to such a vast and shadowy milieu? If you're Trevor Paglen, you do just that: You design a giant reflective sculpture, and you shoot it into space.

Paglen's extraterrestrial artwork is named *Orbital Reflector.* If all goes to plan, the diamond-shape, 100-foot-long inflatable object will have ripped through the night skies in low orbit for about six to eight weeks after its launch in late November. It will look just like a slow-moving star in the Big Dipper and will complete a revolution around the world about every 90 minutes. Ultimately, it will burn to nothing in Earth's atmosphere.

The project highlights the extent of the military's reach through an inherent contradiction: *Orbital Reflector,* built by aerospace contractor Global Western, will be sent toward the stars inside a CubeStat satellite on a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket. More likely than not, the freight will also include at least one spy satellite. But the venture also serves as a nice foil to themes present throughout the artist's oeuvre: On top of depicting what invisibility and government secrecy look like, *Orbital Reflector* may prompt us to see the cosmos anew.

"I think it's provocative to say, 'I'm going to make something and put it in the sky and it will be visible from Earth,'" Paglen explains. "You're provoking a conversation about what the legitimate uses of space are. You're provoking a conversation about who should have the rights to do what in a space—pardon my pun—that we instinctually think of as a shared resource, which it is."

"Trevor is not advocating that artists begin shooting satellites into orbit," says David Walker, executive director and CEO of the Nevada Museum of Art, which partnered with Paglen on the project. "What he's doing is asking us to reconsider the preciousness of Earth." And of course *Orbital Reflector*'s location gives it a simple, striking characteristic: "More people will see it and know about it than just about any artwork that's ever been created," Walker says.

Early in our conversation, Paglen tells me about Nikolai Fedorov, a 19th century Russian philosopher who wrote about space as a mystical tool that could reincarnate everyone who had ever lived. Space, he believed, would help humanity achieve something akin to the Kingdom of Heaven. The proto-transhumanist would go on to influence the architects of the early Russian space program.

"That seems unthinkable," Paglen says of cosmism theories, "and to me, that's what art aspires to: not only to challenge you to think in a different way but to see in a different way."

Later, he reiterates his interest in the philosopher and the value of challenging our sense of reality through otherworldly ideas. "If you can imagine that, then maybe you can imagine having more social justice or having more equitable health care policies or what have you," Paglen says. He laughs again, with less resignation this time. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **STEPHEN VOSS**

TELL ME WHAT YOU SEE

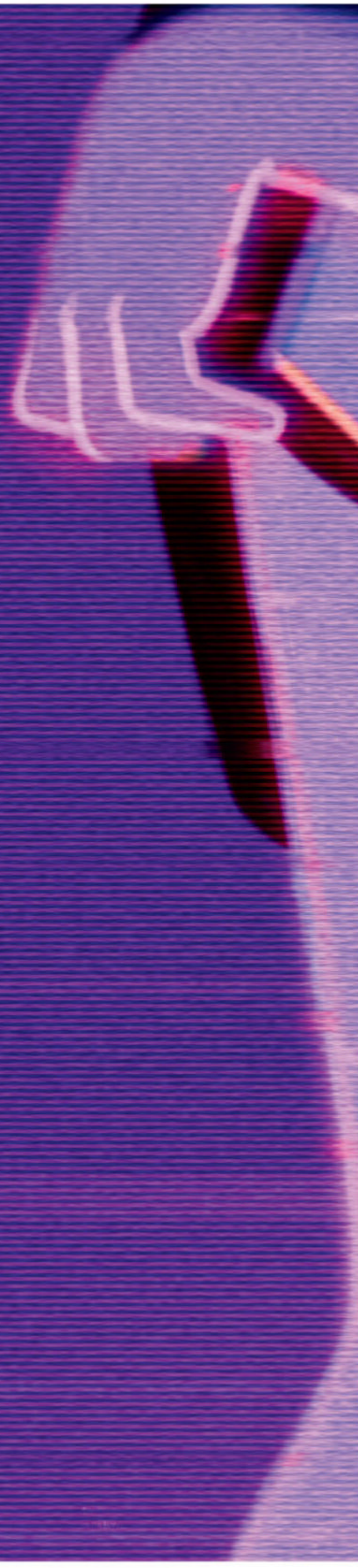


ILLUSTRATION BY
CHIARA
GHIGLIAZZA

BY **TERENA BELL**

IMAGINE A PROGRAM THAT COULD PREDICT YOUR EVERY FETISH, MEMORIZE YOUR EVERY DESIRE. WOULD YOU USE IT? ONE PORN COMPANY THINKS YOU WOULD. INSIDE THE LATEST ADVANCEMENT IN SEX, TECH AND GETTING OFF

In the fourth season of *Silicon Valley,* HBO's Emmy-winning, Cupertino-mocking comedy series, one of the characters develops a visual-recognition app that can identify food in pictures, classifying every image as either "hot dog" or "not hot dog." When one of the guys uses the app to take a dick pic, he discovers that he does, in fact, have a "hot dog." They end up selling the technology to video-streaming app Periscope, which plans to use it to detect porn.

Visual-recognition technology is, of course, nothing new. Most social media companies—dating apps included—use computer vision to enforce community guidelines and root out X-rated images. If Instagram or Facebook has ever deleted one of your photos, it's because computer vision told it to. For the most part, its function has been to prevent adult content from spreading where it doesn't belong.

xHamster, one of the highest-trafficked porn sites, has other plans.

Currently, to find a specific scene on the site, users have to browse a category page or search a tag. xHamster vice president Alex Hawkins wants to move toward searches without words—ones in which "AI facial and body recognition tech" will access your viewing history "to identify similar performers or the same performer or similar videos." The question is, can it be done? Distinguishing one hot dog from another hot dog isn't easy—that is to say, recognizing something as pornographic is a different skill from finding the best video for you. In a world where most computer-vision technology is developed to identify tangible objects such as clothing and food, can an algorithm be trained to know your sexual desires?

The answer, according to Matias Klein, chief executive officer of the artificial intelligence company Kognition, depends on data. "The accuracy of the model is highly dependent on the quality of the input training data," he says. And data sets aren't always interchangeable. In other words, the same machine-learning engine that recognizes shirts and sandwiches won't instantly know porn. "Which categories will be created is a human-level decision, not necessarily a computer task," explains Albert Bou Fadel, chief executive officer of technology company SmartBarrel. "It is a human filter that will decide what to keep as a category and what to disregard."

His question is a subjective one about what porn is and what it isn't. That's important, given that watching porn is a deeply personal experience. If we each have our own idea of what's sexy, how can we collectively train a computer? To the machine-learning systems of today, there are few visual differences between nipple play and checking yourself for breast cancer: Both show a hand circling around nipples. One is clearly sexual; the other is not. This illustrates a problem Facebook has encountered and why the platform has been criticized for mislabeling photos of women breast-feeding as porn. "Building and labeling a training data set and then designing and optimizing a deep neural network is not a trivial task," Klein says.

In 2016, Yahoo made one of its deep-learning algorithms public by open-sourcing its code for the entire internet to use. What's fascinating about that release is that Yahoo explicitly told the public its algorithm does not detect porn but rather flags visual content "not suitable/safe for work (NSFW), including offensive and adult images." As Yahoo research engineer Jay Mahadeokar and product manager Gerry Pesavento wrote in a company blog post, "Defining NSFW material is subjective." Unlike the hot dog app on *Silicon Valley,* Yahoo's system isn't designed to give users a hard yes or no. Instead, it analyzes images individually, assigning each a score based on how likely it is to be offensive. "Developers can use this score to filter images below a certain suitable threshold," the two explained, "or use this signal to rank images in search results."

Because we live in a time when you can't publish a NSFW detector without someone hacking it, a young computer programmer named Gabriel Goh quickly manipulated Yahoo's algorithm to produce extreme versions of NSFW imagery. (In programming speak, Goh accomplished this "by maximally activating certain neurons of the classifier.") If you were to look at the images—highly exaggerated, colorful, mutated and abstract versions of male and female genitalia—you'd notice there's little about them that's sexy. To echo United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's infamous words on porn, "I know it when I see it." This isn't it.

Because of how open source works—once code is shared with GitHub's tech community, it's available for anyone to play with—Yahoo can't track how many engineers have used the tool for its intended function. But people are indeed using it, based on the chat boards on start-up accelerator Y Combinator. There, engineers have complained that Yahoo's system works well detecting porn for white performers but not for those of color. One user, niftich, suggests Yahoo's training data must have included more white actors, which brings us back to Klein's point about the importance of data.

Indeed, the porn industry has been heavily criticized for treating minority performers more as fetishes than people. According

to a 2013 study from data journalist Jon Millward, "Deep Inside: A Study of 10,000 Porn Stars and Their Careers," 70.5 percent of female stars are white. But user aabo notes that the difference in system performance may "also reflect what is most distinguishable. Which is easier for [the computer] to confidently distinguish: black pubic hair on black skin, or black pubic hair on white skin? Darker nipples on black skin, or darker nipples on white skin?"

Nipple color, waxed versus unwaxed pubic regions and other precise physical characteristics are where visual recognition may truly revolutionize search. "This level of specificity is hard to do with keyword searches alone," says Hawkins. "Specifically, with a platform like ours, where self-produced amateur content is often uploaded without significant keywords or descriptive text, these unarticulated visual identifiers can help connect the content." In his view, a computer may be better able than language to tell us what we want. With xHamster's system, which the company began developing in July 2017, Hawkins says, "the AI can help identify performers similar to one a viewer already likes, matching body and facial structure and other identifying features."

Hawkins points out that xHamster isn't using Yahoo's tech—its own tech is already in use. For example: When you visit xHamster.com, the site drops a cookie that tracks the videos you view. When one clip ends, the system uses that video's visuals to recommend what you should watch next. Right now, the software focuses on facial characteristics and body types. An ideal system would pick up on every other visual element that could make or break the mood. From large tattoos to badly lit rooms, from women pulling back their hair with 1980s headbands to nature settings, visual-recognition software could help porn platforms create an endless array of previously unimagined categories.

"This," Hawkins says, "becomes increasingly important as we move toward virtual-reality productions, which move consumers further and further away from the keyboard." In November, xHamster launched a VR platform that allows viewers to navigate using eye movement. This is critical to bringing a VR world alive—and because our eyes naturally fixate on what our brains deem attractive, eye tracking might one day also help visual search pinpoint exactly which seconds of video turn us on the most. "Our current database now includes more than 1 million individuals and 3 million videos," Hawkins explains—everything from real-life exhibitionist couples to independently produced fetish clips. At the time of this writing, xHamster's internal tech team had analyzed some 35,000 of these videos, webcam performances and studio clips.

Hawkins claims the goal isn't just to offer better search results but to help fans and performers connect to create a pathway to finding more porn featuring the people they like. Visual recognition won't stop at recommending another (possibly free) clip to stream. It will direct—and up-sell—you to upcoming webcam engagements or specific channels.

Of course, in threesome and orgy videos, xHamster's system still isn't sophisticated enough to determine who turns you on the most. As with computerized translation, chatbot development and other types of machine learning, AI engines learn not only from the data engineers who train them but from real people who provide feedback on system results. Along with eye tracking, user feedback might someday help xHamster pinpoint which performers are more engaging.

Bou Fadel calls visual recognition "a work in progress," something that will take years to perfect. "Computer vision today is still a black box. There's a lot of science and theories of how it works, but for the most part, we're scraping the surface," he says. In the meantime, hackers, xHamster's team and porn giants will continue to tweak algorithms, unveil virtual-reality programs and track your viewing, all in an effort to find a single formula for predicting the sexual desires of all humankind. The biggest takeaway? Deleting your browser history may soon become pointless. ■

IS PORN A HUMAN RIGHT?

ADULT CONTENT SEEMS TO BE EVERYWHERE—WITH ONE OMINOUS EXCEPTION

Here's a fact: One of America's most popular pastimes, which in turn satisfies a biological need, is also one of the most denounced and contested—the consumption of adult content. Porn is a vast and limitless ocean that feels ubiquitous to those of us who can freely access it. But in this country's correctional facilities, it's at risk of being outlawed amid increasing government overreach. Do prisoners have a right to the same sexual imagery as the rest of society?

Policies vary from state to state, but in 2017 Charles E. Sisney, an inmate in South Dakota, backed by the American Civil Liberties Union, challenged the state's Department of Corrections' pornography policy, which bans prisoners from purchasing or possessing adult content.

Similar bans have popped up in Nebraska, Connecticut and Michigan. The general argument is that banning adult content promotes safer environments and quicker rehabilitation, but virtually no studies have examined the links, positive or negative, between porn consumption and inmate behavior. These bans can also create underground barter systems, wherein pornography that slips through can fetch a potentially violent premium in prison yards.

The question is, if states can police adult content in prisons, will they stop there? What counts as "pornographic," and will the authorities know it when they see it? Not so coincidentally, Sisney's court case in South Dakota had him also challenging the confiscation of manga comics, erotic novels and a book of modern art—reading material all deemed too explicit by the Department of Corrections. And in Florida, *Prison Legal News* is petitioning the Supreme Court over the state's ban on the magazine in prisons. It may be a leap to suggest that restricting the consumption of certain media by populations deemed to be less worthy will threaten one of the most important promises on which this country was founded. It's not a leap, however, to suggest that *censorship* may be a word we're cozying up to too often.—*Anita Little*

Cheers and Jeers

What to do when an extremist group decides to gather at your local bar? Inside a cultural and constitutional quagmire

Make Westing, a popular bar in Oakland, California, has a front patio that some patrons refer to as the city's front porch. "We have a huge crowd, and it's everything—it's black, it's white, it's old, it's young," says a representative of the bar, who asked not to be named. Imagine their surprise last summer when an assistant manager saw a Reddit post claiming that a local chapter of the Proud Boys would be meeting there.

The bar had a choice to make: Let the group in or kick them out. "We were between a rock and a hard place," the rep says. "If we said, 'Fine, come,' we'd get destroyed in a liberal city like Oakland. And if we didn't let them come, the alt-right would come after us." (Started during the 2016 presidential campaign by Vice Media co-founder Gavin McInnes, the Proud Boys reject the "alt-right" label; the group calls itself a "Western chauvinist" organization. The Southern Poverty Law Center classifies it as a hate group.) After consulting with lawyers and other bars in the neighborhood, Make Westing decided to "figure out what good we could possibly bring to this." They created a Facebook post disavowing racism and announcing an event of their own for the day of the planned Proud Boys meeting—one that would raise money for Black Lives Matter, the ACLU and other organizations.

The day before Make Westing's event, African American teenager Nia Wilson was murdered by a white man at an Oakland train station, and the organizers of a march scheduled for the next day decided it would end at the bar. Suddenly, Make Westing was at the center of an upheaval: Even the mayor of Oakland tweeted a link to its original Facebook post, which reached more than 100,000 people.

On the big day, the Proud Boys didn't show. Make Westing's event raised thousands of dollars for Wilson's family and various progressive causes, but the bar experienced online and voice-mail vitriol from both sides. "No matter what we did, we were wrong in a lot of people's eyes," the bar's representative says.

In this apparent civil-liberties stalemate, the staff of Make Westing is not alone. In September, a group of alleged white nationalists harassed and pepper-sprayed a Democratic Socialists of America meeting at a bar in Louisville, Kentucky. In July, six skinheads were charged with ethnic intimidation and simple assault after beating an African American man at a bar in Avalon, Pennsylvania. Later that month, Joey Gibson—a U.S. Senate candidate and the leader of Patriot Prayer, a far-right group whose marches and rallies have turned violent several times—urged followers in a Facebook Live post to contact a Vancouver, Washington bar that had kicked him out. The bar was inundated with harassment and threats.

BY **JASON HORN**

It can happen the other way too: In Los Angeles last summer, a scuffle broke out in a bar one Saturday night after a Proud Boys gathering wasn't ejected quickly enough and opponents of the group showed up en masse. The bar closed that night and Sunday. Its owner, who was not at the bar during the incident, issued a statement: "I am ultimately to blame for not having a policy in place to deal with this sort of thing that could be implemented in my absence," he wrote. "I've just never had any experience with something like this before."

The political and business consequences of refusing to serve certain people may be complicated, but the legal consequences are not. "You have a First Amendment right to associate with some and to disassociate with others," says Matt C. Pinsker, a constitutional law expert and adjunct professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. "The general rule is private-property owners can do whatever they want as long as it doesn't discriminate against a legally protected class," including those based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, age, disability and a few other categories—but definitely not including political views. (Sexual orientation is a protected class in some states but not federally; see the Supreme Court's 2018 Masterpiece Cakeshop decision.) Technically, then, business owners and staff "can discriminate against other groups," Pinsker says. "If you have something you find morally appalling, you have the right to exclude them from your bar. Some people might find fans of the wrong football team morally appalling, and others might find neo-Nazis morally appalling."

Even on a small scale, the decision to kick someone out for their beliefs is fraught. San Diego bartender Ashley Wardle learned this firsthand when she eighty-sixed a customer wearing a Proud Boys shirt last summer. "I was the person in charge at the time; none of the owners were in," she says. "I told him, 'I can't serve you at this bar wearing that shirt.' He said, 'Well, now who's the bigot?' "

The customer left, and Wardle thought that was the end of it. But a few days later, her phone started blowing up with messages from her bosses. She heard the guy she'd kicked out had posted about the incident on several far-right websites, and the bar was getting hit with negative reviews and posts. One now-deleted tweet from a local conservative activist even named Wardle specifically. The bar's owner worked quickly to have the online abuse taken down, but the experience contributed to Wardle's decision to find a different bartending job soon afterward. (Fearing further reprisals, the owner also asked that this story not name the bar.)

"I kick people out for being too drunk, but that was the first time I've had to deal with anything like this," Wardle says. "Like most bars, this is a small start-up. There was barely a training or an employee manual, let alone a policy for this situation. The idea of an alt-right person coming in the bar was not even in the owner's mind."

Make Westing's representative agrees: "If you're fighting or treating people poorly, you're kicked out; you're banned. But there was no specific policy on the Proud Boys." There's still no specific policy at Make Westing, and the representative is ambivalent about the bar being drawn into this controversy. "Hopefully it brought more good than bad, but I don't know."

Wardle doesn't regret her actions. "Wearing a hate group's shirt is a statement of hate; it was designed to provoke a reaction," she says. "Whether or not he was a member of this group, his shirt made him one. As bartenders, our responsibility goes way beyond just putting stuff in glasses. It's creating a space that's inviting and safe."

Most bars, of course, don't have constitutional scholars on staff. But there may be hope in numbers: In advance of the Unite the Right 2 rally in Washington, D.C. last August, the Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington sent a "toolkit" to its members, affirming their freedom to refuse service to white nationalists and other political groups. The event and its counterprotests were relatively peaceful, especially compared with the deadly Charlottesville rally of 2017; D.C. saw only one arrest. But with hard-right groups growing ever more bold since the 2016 election, standoffs like these won't be going away anytime soon. Proprietors, pint pullers and patrons will have to decide for themselves whether extremist groups should hide in the shadows or be exposed to the (neon, possibly smoke-wreathed) light. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MAURIZIO DI IORIO**

TOURISTA

Into sex toys? Come visit Los Angeles, where you can rent Emma (Vivant Dolls) for $119 an hour. Retail price: $1,299.

ATTRACTION

An unusual form of sex tourism wants to set up shop in the States. Can our country handle it in the era of #MeToo?

BY **SUSAN SHAIN**

On a quiet street in northern Toronto, among well-kept yards, luxury cars and a small Christian-owned business, sits a five-bedroom stone house. A neatly coiffed woman drives by in a Mercedes, likely unaware of the home's inhabitants: six bare Barbie-proportioned life-size silicone dolls available for rent by the half hour or the hour. All day, every day, while life and oxygen and men move around them, the dolls lie stock-still on white sheets, their anime-esque eyes staring vacantly at the building's stately high ceilings. This is the headquarters of Aura Dolls.

Opened in September 2018, Aura Dolls is one of the first sex-doll brothels in North America. It charges patrons 120 Canadian dollars for an hour with one of its "classy, sophisticated and adventurous ladies." Aura's owners—anonymous Canadian entrepreneurs—came up with the attraction when they discovered similar successful establishments while vacationing in Japan. In the past two years, sex-doll brothels have popped up in countries throughout Europe, including Spain, France, Germany, Denmark and Austria, and have now begun to roll into North America—but not without public outcry.

Last year, another Canadian-based company, KinkySdollS, attempted to open the first such brothel in the United States, in Houston. Before KinkySdollS could even hang new signage, Houston's city council blocked it by updating a local ordinance to ban citizens from partaking in sex at a business with any device that resembles a human. "I know there's some people that will sit there and say, 'What does the City of Houston have to do with any of this?' " councilman Greg Travis told *USA Today* at the time. "And the answer is we're not getting into your bedroom, but don't bring it into our district. Don't bring it into our city. This is not a good business for our city. We are not Sin City."

Beyond triggering neighbors, sex-doll brothels have raised serious questions about sexual ethics and power dynamics. In 2017, the world's first known such brothel, Barcelona's LumiDolls, was reportedly bombarded with requests for childlike dolls and bedroom scenes glorifying rape. Last fall, Vancouver's BellaDolls was blasted for encouraging customers to "forget the restrictions and limitations" that accompany "a real partner." And Aura marketing director Claire Lee tells me the company's workers have found dolls "all bent up" after sessions and have even had to ban one customer who showed up with fake blood.

Despite these disturbing stories, brothel owners argue they're not doing any harm—and may actually

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MOLLY CRANNA**

be providing a valuable service to society. Lee claims the majority of Aura's patrons aren't miscreants but people whose sexual needs aren't being met elsewhere, such as those diagnosed with autism or suffering from social anxiety, men with uninterested wives and widowers seeking companionship. One of the brothel's most frequent customers, she says, is a man in his mid-30s who comes in several days a week, several hours at a time, to have sex, cuddle and watch TV.

It may be easy to imagine Aura as a cross between a seedy massage parlor and a realized Westworld, but it's quite the opposite. There's no bar and no flirting. Instead, the entire experience is designed to eliminate human interaction. After arriving, patrons text Aura's control room, which remotely unlocks the front door. (Before leaving, they'll text again to ensure they won't run into anyone on the way out.) A small sign instructs visitors to "remove shoes and leave payment," and the interior lighting is dim and romantic, with white fabric enshrouding the windows. During my visit, I meet Anna lying on an unremarkable bed.

Anna, I'm told, is the most popular doll, and she proudly flaunts a 32H bust. With no blood flowing through her, a space heater whirs in an attempt to keep her warm. Her makeup looks fresh because it's reapplied every day. Her fake eyelashes are secured with heavy-duty Gorilla Glue.

Across the hall in another room sits Yuki, an underage-looking "Korean" doll whose touted personality traits—including "submissive" and "innocent"—conjure racial stereotypes. Within arm's reach is everything you'll need to get to know her: three LifeStyles condoms, paper towels and a bottle of K-Y Jelly. A remote control sits on the side table, encased in a plastic bag. When maneuvered, it lights up a television screen with Pornhub's home page.

Down a spiraling staircase is more silence and silicone. Inside room number three I meet Scarlett (ethnicity: "American"). When the door shuts, her manicured fingers jiggle, and I can't help but think of the 1998 animated movie *Small Soldiers,* a PG-13-rated version of *Toy Story* in which the Barbie dolls are far more violent than you'd imagine. As with the other dolls, conversation isn't Scarlett's strong suit. Her fans likely come only to enjoy one of her three holes, each of which features "different yet unique textures, ridges and tightness." Scarlett's skin is velvety, if not exactly warm, and her accoutrements feel surprisingly real. The entire time I'm there, her eyes remain wide open, unblinking, glassy, ready to experience what people pay to do to her. She will never say no.

Of course, when you're inanimate you can't say "Keep going" or "Stop." No "Is this okay?" or "Does this feel good?" Even the most advanced sex dolls on the market—equipped with artificial intelligence, self-lubrication and heated skin—can't hold a conversation. This has attracted scrutiny in the #MeToo era, as it effectively means they can't give or revoke consent. Matt McMullen, founder of sex-doll manufacturer Abyss Creations, calls the consent debate "severely premature." He recently launched Harmony, a doll equipped with an artificially intelligent head that fits onto his

company's voluptuous bodies. Harmony can answer basic questions about her favorite movies and remember facts about the user. Although intelligent, she's certainly not conscious—nor should she be, as that's her main draw.

"I don't think a sex doll or robot should have the ability to say yes or no any more than my toaster," says McMullen. "When we've created an AI that's truly self-aware and fully capable of experiencing the things human beings experience—such as pain, rejection, abuse—they would no longer be simple machines." That, he says, is when the issue of consent should come into play. McMullen doesn't believe men's behavior with robots will bleed into their behavior with women, as "most stable-minded humans will know the difference." He points to video games, in which players gleefully steal cars or jump off buildings but would never do so in real life.

Christa B. Daring, executive director of the U.S. chapter of the Sex Workers Outreach Project, also thinks of sex dolls—even ones with AI—as toys, not stand-ins. "There's no requirement to gain consent, because it's an object," Daring says. "I don't gain the consent of the vibrators I use. I don't think that depletes my ability to gain consent with humans." On the same page is Barbara G. Brents, professor of sociology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. "We learn our behaviors from a wide variety of sources," she says. "To think a few sex dolls are going to dramatically remake gender relationships and the notion of consent is kind of ridiculous."

The United Kingdom's Campaign Against Sex Robots views the issue differently. On its website it states the machines "are potentially harmful and will contribute to inequalities in society" for reasons including the sexual objectification of women and children, the reduction of sex workers to "things" and the diminishment of human empathy. The founder, stating that "PLAYBOY promotes and profits from the dehumanization of women," declined to comment for this article.

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As for the sex-tourism industry in general, experts don't imagine these dolls will create new tourist economies anytime soon—at least not until the technology has advanced significantly. Brents cites her research on sex workers, which found that only half the respondents list "sexual gratification" as their primary reason for paying for sex. The rest seek intimacy, connection and communication. "Most females and males want a human on the other end of that genital," she says.

When more realistic, "thinking" robots are inevitably created, University of British Columbia economist Marina Adshade says, they could render human sex workers obsolete altogether. A frequent writer on robots and relationships, Adshade sums this up as "technology replacing labor. And I think it's inevitable."

After I leave Aura, I stroll past a row of elegant houses. A woman stands at an upstairs window. She pulls the curtain back and, while speaking to someone on her phone, glares at the brothel. The future is just beyond her doorstep, and she's not happy about it. ■

Red Tide RISING

What if the only way to make America great again is to embrace the political system it has historically feared most?

BY **ADAM SKOLNICK**
ILLUSTRATION BY **RIKI BLANCO**

Last October, President Trump wrote a *USA Today* op-ed in which he argued that Democrats have become "radical socialists who want to model America's economy after Venezuela. If Democrats win control of Congress, we will come dangerously closer to socialism in America." Well, Democrats won the House and fell short in the Senate. So what happens if they conjure a clean sweep in 2020? Should we fear economic collapse at the hands of socialists in Democratic pantsuits?

It's worth asking, because at this moment all across America tens of thousands of socialists are working to take the reins of government—and when they run, they campaign largely as Democrats. The way Trump and the GOP spin it, socialism breeds economic doom. But what drives the new American socialist hustle is the counterintuitive idea, rooted in economic theory and hard data, that socialist policies could actually grow the economy. According to the numbers, if we really wanna MAGA, the smart move would be to embrace a political model America learned to loathe long ago.

The Democratic Socialists of America, the most visible socialist organization in the country, launched in 1982 as a coalition of Marxist holdouts who had weathered the red scare of the 1950s—when Communist Party members were tracked by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, interrogated by Senator Joseph McCarthy, fired from jobs and blacklisted in Hollywood—and younger activists who emerged from the antiwar movement of the late 1960s. The DSA had 6,000 charter members but had been in the shadows for more than 30 years.

Then Bernie happened.

The only democratic socialist in the Senate, Bernie Sanders promised Medicare for all, free college tuition and a $15 minimum wage, and he stoked his 2016 campaign with the rage of those fed up with playing a rich man's rigged game. Federal Reserve data show that the top 10 percent of Americans in 2016 owned 77 percent of the country's wealth (the top one percent owned 38.5 percent), while 40 percent of Americans would have to sell something to cover a $400 emergency expense. According to Dean Baker, a senior economist at the Center for Economic and Policy Research, the child poverty rate in the U.S. is more than 20 percent. To Sanders and his followers, none of that adds up.

Bianca Cunningham, a young African American labor organizer, was one of those followers. Cunningham, now 33, wasn't particularly political until she graduated from college and took a retail job at Verizon Wireless in Brooklyn, where she heard about and experienced sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace. She contacted the Communication Workers of America, seeking support, and went on to unionize seven Brooklyn Verizon stores. The CWA was deeply involved with Occupy Wall Street and was one of the few unions to endorse Sanders. Early in his candidacy, Sanders appeared alongside Cunningham in front of a Verizon store.

"After he lost," Cunningham says, "we thought, Are we gonna let this momentum die or build off of this? So we ducked under the existing DSA umbrella. That was the beginning." The DSA had been involved with the Sanders campaign since 2015, so it was a natural fit. Cunningham remembers that at her first DSA meeting, in the summer of 2016, she saw only 25 people. Then 50. The first gathering after Trump won, she recalls seeing 500. This so-called Trump bump happened in chapters across the country.

Meanwhile, a handful of former Bernie campaign staffers formed an organization called Brand New Congress, with a mission to elect a range of congressional candidates under a common platform inspired by Sanders's campaign. They hoped to raise enough money to run more than 400 candidates—"regular people like us," says executive director Isra Allison, "teachers, engineers, scientists"—and wound up with 31 in the 2018 primaries. BNC is not affiliated with the DSA, but its breakout star, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, also a former Bernie staffer and the youngest woman ever elected to Congress, came out of the revitalized New York City DSA.

Ocasio-Cortez is not alone. Card-carrying DSA member Rashida Tlaib was elected to represent Detroit in Congress. And before either of them made headlines, the DSA's Lee Carter, a Marine Corps veteran, was elected to Virginia's House of Delegates from a Republican district.

Point to just about any relevant political scrum of 2018 and the DSA was there. That West Virginia teachers' strike that resulted in a five percent salary bump was sparked by DSA affiliates in the state. When the family-separation crisis was white-hot, it was Metro D.C. DSA members who tracked down Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen and shamed her out of a Mexican restaurant. DSA members were in a Senate office on Capitol Hill during the Kavanaugh protests.

According to a recent BuzzFeed poll, 48 percent of millennial Democrats and 23 percent of millennial Republicans identify as democratic socialists. "We have no recollection of the Cold War," Cunningham says. "We didn't live through the red scare. We don't have these stigmas in our mind." There are now 52,000 active DSA members and counting.

Trump and the GOP don't like their policies because they'll demand higher taxes on the rich—a four to 12 percent hike, according to Baker. In the Republicans' preferred free-market model, economic growth comes only from business investment, not government. That's why they passed the nearly 40 percent corporate tax cut that sent the deficit soaring.

As much as Republicans enjoy watching cash trickle down, the engine of any economy is not corporate investment but aggregate demand—the day-to-day spending on goods and services. Socialist economist Richard Wolff calls the policies that Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez seek "trickle-up economics." They want to put money back into the hands of everyday people and let it circulate. Consider this: Venezuela doesn't have an elaborate social safety net; Norway does. There, 80 percent of the country is middle income (compared with America's 52 percent), and the economy is thriving.

We've even tried it here before. After the Great Depression, President Roosevelt, compelled by organized labor and a fierce, pre-blacklist Communist Party, pushed a New Deal through Congress, establishing Social Security, a minimum wage and a jobs program. And we taxed the rich to pay for it. The 1944 GI Bill helped working-class veterans attend college for free. What happened next was a wholesale redistribution of wealth and 30 years of sustained growth that the majority of Americans shared. The New Deal built the modern middle class. It hatched the American dream.

You might have heard of those days, the ones so many are nostalgic for. You know, back when America was "great." ■

CELEBRITIES ARE SUPER COOL

At a time when the free press is under attack, we sent *Broad City*'s Paul W. Downs to execute the highest form of journalism: the celebrity profile

BY **PAUL W. DOWNS**

As I sit at the bar at the Hearth & Hound in Hollywood, a hip restaurant my subject suggested because it's helmed by a female chef, I can't decide if I should get a drink or not. Maybe a drink will take the edge off, cool my nerves. I've done this kind of thing countless times, and yet somehow I'm nervous. I guess it's not that surprising. It's not every day I get to profile a bona fide multihyphenate. Paul W. Downs is a comedian, actor, writer, producer and director. And judging from his body, he could be a dancer. But I don't want to drink if he's not drinking, so I order a sparkling water and wait.

I don't even need to look behind me to know he's entered the room. People in the restaurant perk up. When I do turn around, I realize it's because he's waving to them, blowing kisses at random patrons. He doesn't seem to know these people, but it doesn't matter—that's just how warm he is, how generous with his attention. Standing an impressive five-foot-nine, he somehow seems larger, more commanding.

"Sorry I'm late," he says. "I was just driving back from canvassing in a congressional swing district up north." Wow. How Downs finds time to volunteer is hard to imagine. At the time of this interview, he had just wrapped shooting in New York on the critically acclaimed *Broad City*'s fifth and final season, launching in January. Not only is he one of the show's main writers, an executive producer and a beloved cast member (he plays Trey Pucker), this season Downs is adding "director" to his repertoire.

But this is only the tip of the iceberg: With his partner and live-in girlfriend, Lucia Aniello, Downs helms a production company called Paulilu (a clever take on Desilu); the company produced 2017's *Rough Night* (which grossed nearly $50 million at the box office) and Comedy Central's *Time Traveling Bong,* a prestige miniseries. He's currently writing a Kevin Hart movie for Universal and producing a sketch show that's in development at the aforementioned cable channel. And those are just the projects he's "allowed" to talk about.

"Oh, you're just having water? Mind if I drink?" he asks. Damn. Guess I should have had that cocktail after all. He orders a glass of Rioja, so I get one too. Downs has a disarming quality about him. He looks, as the internet will attest, like a Disney prince. His dark brown hair and blue-gray eyes twinkle as he talks. But it's his quick wit and bawdy humor that make him such an enigma. He reminds me of a young Martin Short with the sex appeal of Jessica Rabbit. And then our conversation begins.

DOWNS: Your most recent film role is in Netflix's *Like Father,* which was the streaming service's number one movie in 100 countries the weekend it premiered.
DOWNS: I know—pretty crazy.
DOWNS: Kelsey Grammer is known for his iconic roles on television but hasn't made so many films. Was it your involvement that drew him to the project?
DOWNS: No, no. He and Kristen Bell were already attached when I was cast.
DOWNS: Really? I'm surprised. Well, in the film you play a family psychologist who is obsessed with the relationship between Kelsey and Kristen. What did it feel like to give advice to one of TV's most iconic therapists, Dr. Frasier Crane?
DOWNS: Oh, it was so trippy. But an honor.
DOWNS: How do you stay in shape?
DOWNS: Right now, a lot of volunteering. You burn a lot of calories walking door to door and canvassing. Also, resistance training.

Clearly. I go on: "As a movie star——" but he stops me. "I'm not a movie star," he says earnestly. "But you are," I tell him. "You star in *Rough Night* opposite Scarlett Johansson, with Kate McKinnon, Jillian Bell, Ilana Glazer and Zoë Kravitz...."

"Well, when you put it that way, I guess. But I don't consider myself a movie star." It's that kind of humility that is so surprising, so refreshing from someone as awe-inspiring as he is. His ability to stay grounded, his modesty—not to mention small pores—are what make him so appealing. He's a hot movie star who doesn't even know he's a hot movie star. I'd say he was stupid for not knowing, but I can't, because he's objectively so damn smart.

DOWNS: In *Rough Night* you play Scarlett Johansson's love interest. Scarlett has obviously had her share of on-screen romances. How thrilling do you think it was for her to kiss you?
DOWNS: [*He flashes that movie-star smile, narrowing his eyes and shaking his head. He's not going there....*] You'd have to ask her that.

So we did. And she declined to comment. But this journalist can only infer why: Paul W. Downs was probably the best kisser she'd ever encountered and she didn't want to insult the likes of Chris Evans, Hugh Jackman, Javier Bardem and Penélope Cruz.

At this point we have finished our drinks. I tell him PLAYBOY will pay, but he insists on covering the bill. Chivalry isn't dead! At the valet stand, I start to call a Lyft. "I can give you a ride home if you want," he offers. I say I shouldn't, but he insists.

Downs hits the gas—well, the pedal—of his Lexus hybrid SUV. It's incredibly smooth, and I feel my stomach drop. "Don't worry, I got you," he says as we slow for traffic. I learn that the car isn't even his. It's his girlfriend's. It might seem hard to look badass in your girlfriend's hybrid, but somehow he does. I can't help but look down at his body, at the slate jeans hugging his thick thighs. I'm in a long-term monogamous relationship with a woman, but I still think to myself, *Yeah, I'd hit that.*

We arrive at my hotel. As I get out, I wonder if I should ask him up. I don't want this night to end. But I decide that's crazy, so we say our good-byes. It's not like me to editorialize or fan out, especially to an interview subject, but I can't help it. "You're one of the greatest comedic minds of our generation," I blurt out. "I wouldn't say that," he says. I fire back, "Well, I would. And I'll be publishing it in this magazine." He smiles that smile and drives off. I go up to my room, call room service for another Rioja and masturbate until I fall asleep.

Editor's note: Paul W. Downs was asked to provide 1,200 words for this piece but turned in more than 8,000. Special thanks to his editor for his overtime on this feature.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **NICK RASMUSSEN**

Playboy Advisor

*Sex columnist **Anna del Gaizo** offers some "fatherly" advice to a woman who can't bite her tongue in the bedroom. Plus, advice on rolling in the hay, shower sex and separation anxiety*

Q: *I think I'm addicted to calling men "daddy" during sex. It just comes out! Sometimes they're into it; other times they freak out. I know what you're thinking: daddy issues, right? But I have a relatively healthy relationship with my father. I never used the word in this context before my last boyfriend, when it just happened to become our sexual dynamic. Now I'm hooked. What does it mean, and what should I do?—J.K., Pella, Iowa*

A: Indeed, most people assume that if you have the urge to call your sexual partners "daddy" during sex, you must have daddy issues. Most people are wrong. That argument may have held sway when *Sex and the City* was considered an authority on all things libidinous, but it's a new day. You don't have a Lolita complex either. Any adult woman—or man—with a healthy amount of self-esteem is free to get off on father-figure fantasies without needing a trip to the therapist. Thanks to the ubiquity of May-December relationships, plus Ty Dolla $ign's immortal song "Zaddy" (though it's important to point out *zaddy* and *daddy* denote two different personas; a zaddy is a sexy man with swag, while a daddy is an attractive older man) and the internet's meme-ification of the word, the once salacious and incestuous moniker has become as destigmatized as anal sex.

Thus, in 2019, whispering "Daddy!" in a dude's ear might as well be the equivalent of telling him "You're hot." That's because "daddy" doesn't suggest just age but value—the oldest, best or biggest. Whether it's a reflection of our innate desire to feel subservient in sex or to challenge taboos, this fixation is nothing more than human nature at play.

What was once forbidden is now verging on vanilla—but that doesn't mean every guy you pounce on wants to play papa. I'm guessing you and your ex had a, well, *robust* sex life—not that it should be of much consequence now. The last thing any of us wants is to be sized up against a sexual partner's ex in bed.

When you call men "daddy" in the throes of passion, you're putting on a performance—one that may make you feel simultaneously innocent, insurgent and vixen-like. You're also giving him power. Is it possible the less control you feel, the more earth-shattering your orgasm? Fantasies make sex fun, and let's not forget that

ILLUSTRATION BY **KATIE BAILIE**

who we are during sex rarely aligns with who we present as in life. But both partners need to desire a fantasy, and that can't be forced. Read the (bed)room, quit imposing this on squeamish men, and keep your addiction in check. Better yet, try indulging in some of his fantasies. You'll eventually discover one that gets you both off.

Q: *I love partying on molly instead of drinking or smoking weed. The problem is, even though I feel extremely horny while high, I can't get hard. Is there such a thing as microdosing molly so I can be hard and high at the same time?—K.H., New York, New York*

A: Life is a cruel jokester, isn't it? What makes us horny also keeps us from coming. First, if you choose to do molly, keep in mind that it's illegal. Second, if you do ingest, do so in moderation, as you don't want to lose your brainpower along with your boner. Molly—in theory, MDMA in its purest form—causes a generous release in the brain of serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine, all neurotransmitters that make you feel happy. It also increases oxytocin, often called "the love hormone," which helps solidify emotional bonds. In other words, molly elevates you to vertiginous levels of euphoria and desire. You become a touchy, emotional, overly aware lust machine.

At the same time, some effects of MDMA are similar to those of adrenaline. It serves as a vasoconstrictor, narrowing blood vessels to your penis, among other areas. No blood flow means no hard-on, which means no climax. This is what you're experiencing, and it's why no matter how sexual you may feel while rolling, you can't close the deal. There's a reason molly and its MDMA-centric predecessors have had a reputation as nothing more than a "party drug" since the heyday of Studio 54: It's best suited for dancing, socializing and cuddling.

Although microdosing psychedelics is trending these days, we're talking about aligning stimulated brain chemistry with the pulse of your circulatory system. There's no guarantee that using less of a psychoactive over a longer time will simultaneously make you horny and hard.

I must note that a cocktail of Viagra and MDMA, two substances that can impact your blood pressure, will seriously harm your cardiovascular system and could cause a heart attack. Don't even think about mixing the two. If you're hell-bent on blending the joys of sex with the thrill of a dopamine rush, here's a tip: Try falling in love instead.

Q: *I just got my own one-bedroom apartment for the first time and want to make it a place that impresses women as much as it does my parents when they visit. But I don't have a trust fund. What can I do to elevate my place without breaking the bank?—J.U., Santa Barbara, California*

A: Congratulations! Bonus points for landing your first adult apartment *and* doing it on your own. When in doubt, or in debt, keep it simple. Eliminate clutter by hiding it in something multifunctional like a handsome wooden storage bench. Dump anything that whispers "college dorm," such as multihead floor lamps. If your bed isn't a place you really want to sleep, how can you expect anyone else to want to sleep there? Invest in a queen- or king-size with a headboard, high-thread-count sheets (a combed cotton in the 300-to-400 range will work) and matching pillow shams.

Bare walls are a mood killer; even a single accent wall painted a soft, neutral color enhances a room. Tape on walls is even worse, so frame your posters and prints. Naked windows will make your interior feel cold and do nothing to protect from harsh morning light; spring for a set of curtains, which are cheaper and more elegant than blinds. If you're able to renovate an entire room, start by upgrading old fixtures—all you need is a screwdriver and new doorknobs, cabinet hardware and light-switch covers.

Lighting can also make a difference. You don't need to invest in pricey new fixtures; just switch in 60-watt light bulbs for fluorescents, which make even the nicest furniture look austere. Finally, a coffeemaker, an extra set of fluffy towels and a clean bathroom—don't forget the bath mat—will ensure your apartment is a place where women won't regret spending the night.

Q: *Are steam-room hookups just something Hollywood made up? I joined a new gym, and the locker room is full of hot women. (Yes, I'm a lesbian.) I'm not into public sex; I'm talking about following someone into a shower stall and discreetly eating her out. I would like to explore this, but I'm afraid I'll end up getting banned—or, even worse, humiliated.—R.G., Atlanta, Georgia*

A: Fear not: Such illicit hookups aren't merely myths. As many gay men will attest, the gym locker room has been known to facilitate many sweat-soaked Grindr trysts. The women's room, however, doesn't play host to all that much action, in my experience. Call it the double standard of cruising.

That's not to say it doesn't happen. Public sex, from restaurant bathrooms to department store fitting rooms to remote beaches and beyond, is as timeless as it is tantalizing. But let's be clear: It's one thing to sneak into a shower stall with a woman you already know (go for it, if you don't care about your gym membership) and another to force yourself on an unsuspecting stranger. There's nothing wrong with wanting your reality to be a little more pornographic, but don't get accused of sexual assault in the process. Never follow someone into a public shower stall, no questions asked.

Q: *My wife of 10 years told me she wants to see other people as a kind of test. We both realize things haven't been perfect in our marriage, but I didn't see this coming. She has already gone for it, and I let her because I want to respect her wishes. But I'm out of practice. I don't know how to pick up women, let alone tell them I'm married. I've never even used a dating app. How do married people date in 2019?—P.W., Ypsilanti, Michigan*

A: It may be tempting to wallow in doubt, but you need to view this as an opportunity. You've been granted more than a hall pass: You've been given an entire summer break, and there's no better time to pursue self-discovery.

But first, some questions. What do *you* want from this? Do your friends know? Did you "let her" go for it because you secretly yearned to dabble yourself? It sounds as though you didn't have much of a choice, but there's no going back, so start by embracing what lies ahead.

There's a big difference between two married people dating as a couple and two married people dating independently. You're in the latter category. Essentially, you're now a single man in the dating world. You don't need to announce you're married to every woman you meet, nor should you slap it on your profile when you download a dating app (or five).

If your closest friends are aware of the situation, start by getting out there the old-fashioned way: Go to a bar, social gathering, sports event, networking party—any or all of the above—and just talk to other women. If that doesn't do it, here's a refresher on popular dating apps and the varying levels of discretion they offer: Bumble, which lets women pick up men, is your best option since you're hesitant to approach women right off the bat; Raya is for influencers and successful creatives (the size of your Instagram following factors in whether you can play there); and Tinder provides endless options for people who want to "see a movie," a.k.a. get laid fast. Even Instagram can function as a dating app. (Oh, and avoid Hinge, which can make matches based on mutual Facebook friends.) Try a few, commit to one and go fish. Get a sense of who else is swimming in the sea. There are no hard-and-fast rules for messaging on apps aside from starting all conversations with hello. And guess what—you're not required to meet any of these women in person unless you actually want to.

Now, on to the topic of sharing your marital status. Don't lie, but don't overshare either. Technically you're separated, so give the wedding band a break while you and your wife figure out what you both want. (Unless, of course, she's still wearing hers on dates. She likely isn't.) Stop thinking of yourself as someone's husband and start thinking of yourself as the man you are. Any well-adjusted woman who says she's never had to confront questions of monogamy and commitment is lying to you. In other words, don't stand for any of your dates judging you. A marriage in harmony, an abundant dating life—both lifestyles are great. But neither outranks finding autonomy and happiness in yourself. Use this time wisely.

Questions? E-mail advisor@playboy.com.

Rabbit TALES

From Warhol's Factory to a Texas highway to a research lab at MIT, the Rabbit Head has inspired artists of every ilk from every corner of the globe for 65 years and counting. Here's a warren of our favorites

BY **LIZ SUMAN**

A few weeks before PLAYBOY's first issue was due at the printer, Hugh Hefner and graphic designer Arthur Paul set out to create a symbol to represent the nascent publication's visual identity.

"I wanted it to be something so simple that when you made it larger you could do many things with it," the late Paul recalled in a 2018 documentary about his profound impact on the relationship between art and publishing.

But back in 1953, PLAYBOY's founding art director had no clue that the sophisticated, mischievous bow-tied rabbit with a cocked ear that he'd drafted in under an hour would become arguably the most recognizable silhouette in the world.

"If I'd had any idea how important that little Rabbit was going to be," Paul said, "I probably would have redrawn him a dozen times.... As it was, I did one drawing and that was it."

One take was all it took. The symbol made its cover debut on the magazine's third issue (having graced the interior of the first two). And since the 1960s, it has appeared—sometimes prominently, often cleverly hidden—on nearly every cover. (A careful scan of this story will reveal the first Rabbit to hide *within* PLAYBOY's pages. Hint: It's not one of LeRoy Neiman's Femlins.) The Rabbit's reach quickly extended beyond the magazine: In 1959, a letter mailed from New York addressed with only the symbol was delivered to Playboy's Chicago headquarters; by 1964, the Society of Typographic Arts had ranked it among the top logos ever designed in the United States.

From Andy Warhol's immediately recognizable red rendition (opposite page) to Neiman's delicate expressionist version (above; featured on a 1991 Christmas card and previously unpublished), the Rabbit Head continues to serve as a blank canvas for artists nearly seven decades after Paul executed his "simple" idea.

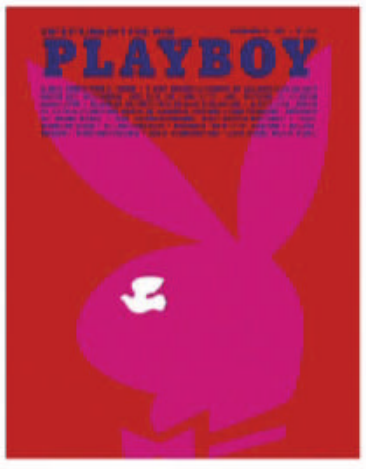
Cover Stories

1956
April 1956 was the first time PLAYBOY's rakish ambassador graced a cover prominently and alone (and in reverse), signifying that PLAYBOY didn't require bare skin or big names to sell magazines.

1960
Paul's inventive art direction set PLAYBOY apart. Example: This Don Bronstein photo reimagined by an actual puzzle maker inspired a jigsaw series that gave readers a new way to take the Rabbit home.

1968
The art department infused this cover with the spirit of the 1960s—and teased a pictorial called *The Provocative Art of Body Painting*—by brushing a psychedelic Rabbit onto model Sharon Kristie.

1971
Darine Stern is celebrated as the first African American to appear solo on a PLAYBOY cover. Her Rabbit-styled throne inspired a perch for future cover models Lindsay Lohan and Marge Simpson.



1971
"When you got the phone call early in your career it meant you were going somewhere," one artist said of longtime associate art director Kerig Pope, who co-created this simple, elegant cover.

Memorable Muses

SEXUAL SURREALISM

In the early 1970s, PLAYBOY asked Salvador Dalí to conceptualize his erotic fantasies, then dispatched staff photographer Pompeo Posar to the small Spanish village of Cadaqués to help the artist realize them. As you can see, our Rabbit—with the support of a blonde quintet—plays a central role in Dalí's escapist visions. The artist's goal for the exercise, which was unveiled in a 1974 pictorial, was as clear as his fantasies were surreal: "The meaning of my work is the motivation that is of the purest—money. What I did for PLAYBOY is very good and your payment is equal to the task."

X-RAY OF THE '80S

What do Marilyn Monroe, Campbell's soup cans and the Playboy Rabbit have in common? By 1986, all three icons had joined the ranks of subjects cranked off the assembly line of Andy Warhol's Factory. "I've got bunnies on the brain," he said of the assignment for PLAYBOY's January 1986 anniversary issue. The piece would be one of Warhol's last major works before his death, and no Rabbit better captures the opulence and commercialism of the decade than the artist's stylish double-exposed version, which features bold slashes of cotton-candy pink and neon purple colliding on a lipstick-red canvas.

HOP ART

Prolific pop artist Keith Haring brought his abstract renderings of playful characters and progressive social ideas to PLAYBOY's pages several times in the 1980s. *Bunny #2,* dubbed *Bunny on the Move* by the artist, is a rerelease of a never-published cover, part of a series commissioned by PLAYBOY in 1986—four years before the artist's death.

1976

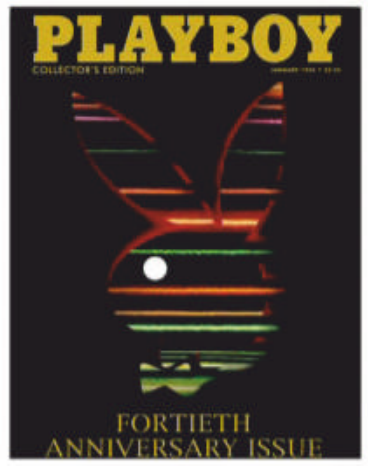
"Have you ever noticed how your Rabbit resembles a butterfly?" mused Vladimir Nabokov in a 1968 letter to Hef. A drawing by the novelist-lepidopterist led to this cover by pinup artist Dennis Magdich.

1979

Award-winning costumer Bob Mackie has dreamed up sequin-drenched gowns for everyone from Cher to Barbie to PMOY Monique St. Pierre, who donned this silver one for our June 1979 cover.

1988

Robert Hoppe superimposed the Rabbit onto this dreamy purple-and-platinum specimen of the glamorous art deco cityscapes that made him Hollywood's go-to poster and set designer.



1994

"His paintings are like drugs," Jeff Koons said of mentor Ed Paschke's creations. "They affect you neurologically." Chicago artist Paschke constructed this neon Rabbit for our 40th anniversary.

2011

Playboy Poland, one of PLAYBOY's 22 international counterparts, has published at least seven Rabbit Head covers since 1992. This button-pushing digital image graced its February 2011 issue.

The Rabbit Reimagined

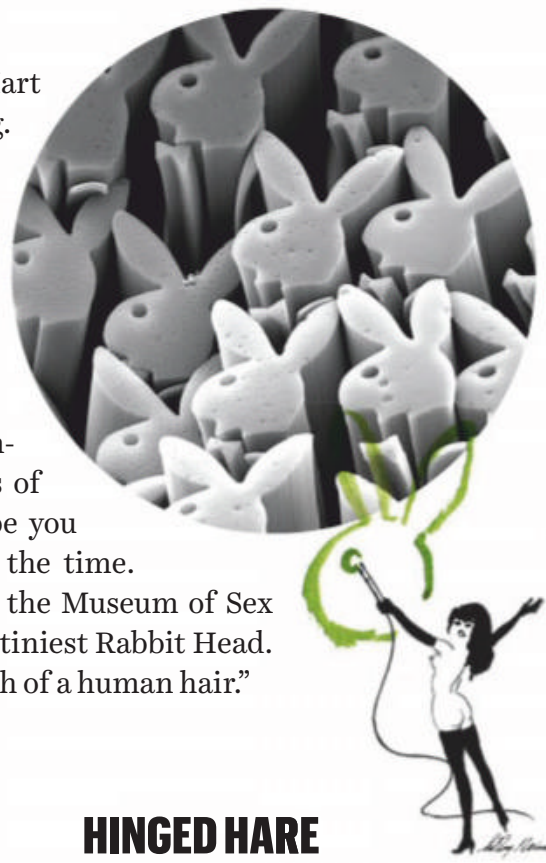
CUBIST COLLAGE

British artist Andrew Hewkin created this never-before-published Rabbit for Playboy's Chicago headquarters in 1991. In addition to a clear affinity for Picasso, Hewkin's mixed-media interpretation stemmed from a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Vietnam in the spring of 1991. Hewkin tells PLAYBOY from his London studio, "I traveled all around and developed a new dimension to my work using collage and works on paper. Hence, the design for the Rabbit Head was influenced heavily by my travels in a war zone that had defeated the USA."

BAS'S BUNNY

This radiant Rabbit was painted by elusive Dutch multimedia artist Bas van Reek in 1992. It's undoubtedly one of our favorite fine art depictions, but its backstory is somewhat of a mystery—few details are known about the piece or the man who created it.

CHEMICAL BOND



In 2007, PLAYBOY reader John Hart had a big idea about a small thing. As an experiment, Hart, an MIT researcher specializing in nanostructures, created a quarter-millimeter-wide Rabbit Head–shaped carbon nanotube by baking a silicon wafer in a high-temperature furnace containing carbon gas. "A chemical reaction draws up millions of parallel nanotubes in any shape you specify," Hart told PLAYBOY at the time. Hart's creation, now housed in the Museum of Sex in New York City, is the world's tiniest Rabbit Head. "The bow ties are about the width of a human hair."

PLAYBOY MARFA

In the summer of 2013, Neville Wakefield, Playboy's then creative director for special projects, tapped artist Richard Phillips to create a temporary roadside installation outside Marfa, Texas. Public response to the project, which centered on the world's tallest Rabbit Head, was decidedly mixed. Countless #PlayboyMarfa selfies flooded the internet, and Phillips made a convincing case for the piece as a visual reconciliation of the brand's legacy with its future; locals deemed it an eyesore packaged as art. Love it or hate it, the piece elicited an undeniably provocative conversation about the line between art and advertising.

HINGED HARE

Self-taught American sculptor Ernest Trova spent more than two months creating this seven-by-four-foot stainless-steel Rabbit Head for PLAYBOY in 1997, and the heavy hinged hare now greets guests from the lobby of the company's world headquarters in Los Angeles. The sculpture, which features a flappable ear and bow tie, is the only known kinetic version of the Rabbit.

THE POWER OF ONE

Pop artist and January 1996 Playmate Victoria Fuller created *The Power of One* after viewing a production of the Pulitzer Prize–winning play *Harvey*. "The play was about a man who had an invisible friend who was a big rabbit," says Fuller. "Mr. Playboy, the Rabbit Head and Hef himself are all Hef to me. Today I see this piece as the spirit of Hef and how the power of one man created such an iconic brand."

ROCK THE RABBIT

Each year from 2007 to 2011, Playboy tapped some choice musical artists to remix its logo for a recurring campaign called Rock the Rabbit. The impressive lineup included Duran Duran, MGMT, Daft Punk, Iggy Pop and dozens more. English electronic band Hot Chip is behind this playful abstract reimagining, which was featured on a T-shirt.

ROGER RABBIT

Roger Brown, an Alabama-born artist associated with the Chicago imagists, had a lifelong appreciation for Southern folk art and functional, handmade art objects. He created this five-foot-tall painted wooden Rabbit for Playboy's Chicago offices in 1992.

Rabbit Relations

Bathing Beauties
Our cheeky July 1966 cover (inset) was shot by staff photographer Larry Gordon on a faux beach in Chicago. Forty-seven summers later, the sexy sandy shot inspired Tony Kelly's aquatic configuration (July/August 2013). It features 25 synchronized swimmers, including Olympians and Vegas performers—to date the most women ever gathered to appear on our U.S. cover.

Elegant Erté
The Rabbit kicked off 1987 on a celebratory note with one of the magazine's most striking covers (inset): an original piece by Erté, the Russian art deco pioneer renowned for his exquisite costumes for Paris's Folies Bergère (and once, famously, Dutch courtesan and spy Mata Hari). Playmate of the Year Stacy Sanches reenacted Erté's romantic vision in 1996.

Human Hares
Playmate of the Year Donna Michelle—a former New York City Ballet dancer—created the first human Rabbit Head in 1964 (inset). Flash forward four decades to futuristic pinup artist Hajime Sorayama's version for the September 2003 cover of *Playboy Japan*. "My longings were not so much carnal as they were an admiration of women as goddesses," he said of his love of pinup.

Skin-Deep
Art Paul and associate art director (and Vargas biographer) Reid Austin designed this faux cutout cover (inset), photographed by Pompeo Posar and featuring Playmate Kathy Douglas, for PLAYBOY's eighth anniversary issue in December 1961. *Playboy Philippines* presented a more risqué interpretation of the concept for its March/April 2015 issue.

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PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: SAM HARRIS

A candid conversation with the scientist, humanist and (depending on whom you ask) Intellectual Dark Web overlord on American orthodoxies—religious and secular, liberal and conservative

At a moment when public discourse seems increasingly split between the virtue-signaling left and the dog-whistling right, Sam Harris inhabits what some call the radical center. A philosopher, neuroscientist, critic of religion and defender of controversial thinkers under siege, he is more or less equally dubious of Donald Trump, Islamic fundamentalism, identity politics and liberal sanctimony. If you believe deeply in something—from God to Kanye—chances are Harris has a pin to pop your balloon.

The New York Times last year lumped Harris in with a rising band of outsider pundits dubbed the "Intellectual Dark Web" alongside such high-minded provocateurs as psychologist Jordan Peterson, mathematician Eric Weinstein and Daily Wire founder Ben Shapiro. Aside from being mostly white men, they have little in common other than assorted eyebrow-raising opinions that arguably keep them locked out of mainstream media and academia. Screw affirmative action! Bring on stricter border control! Multiculturalism sucks! Harris dismisses the whole alliance as kind of a joke.

With his 2004 best-seller *The End of Faith,* Harris found himself part of another group of agitators: the so-called Four Horsemen, a loose affiliation of atheists including Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and the late Christopher Hitchens. In his 2010 book *The Moral Landscape,* Harris argues that science is the key (the only one, really) to understanding morality and well-being. Promoting 2014's *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* on HBO's *Real Time With Bill Maher,* he argued to a beet-faced, table-pounding Ben Affleck that radical Islam is a global menace. The actor accused Harris of being "gross" and "racist"; Harris later said Affleck was likely roided up from his latest Batman gig.

A student of Buddhism and meditation, Harris rides through such rages with unnerving equanimity, as in a 2018 public showdown with Vox.com founder Ezra Klein on the debate around race and IQ. In a nutshell, Harris said there could be a link; Klein called that theory racist. (Klein himself sat for a *Playboy Interview,* with the same writer who spoke with Harris, for our May/June 2017 issue.) "To Harris," Klein said in a follow-up post, "identity politics is

"Your points trump other points, and that's one reason we're so politically dysfunctional. The left eats itself in a way that the right doesn't."

"You should be able to come back from anything as long as you can show the path you took that has made you a different person."

"It wasn't until I took MDMA that I realized there are states of consciousness that explain somebody like Jesus."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHRISTOPHER PATEY**

something others do. To me, it's something we all do, and that he and many others refuse to admit they're doing. This is one of the advantages of being the majority group: Your concerns get coded as concerns; it's everyone else who is playing identity politics."

But whether or not you agree with Klein, it's hard to deny that Harris's priority and passion is the exploration of big and maybe unanswerable questions: Is there such a thing as objective moral truth? Are some values more valuable than others? And where does the dizzying advance of technology factor in?

Samuel Benjamin Harris was born on April 9, 1967 in Los Angeles. He won't confirm many personal details, citing family security concerns, but he is happy to reveal that he first experimented with MDMA while he was a student at Stanford University and that he experienced a spiritual epiphany. He left Stanford midway to study mysticism and Eastern religions in Asia, returning to get a degree in philosophy in 2000. He later received a Ph.D. in neuroscience from UCLA.

These days Harris is among a new breed of public intellectual. Unattached to any particular institution, platform or even doctrine, he lectures, writes and tweets wherever his millions of followers show up to listen. His award-winning *Waking Up* podcast is in its eighth year, and January marks the debut of a new series, *Experiments in Conversation,* involving a range of leading thinkers and a live audience. Harris is married to Annaka Harris, a mindfulness teacher and author of the children's book *I Wonder;* they have two daughters.

PLAYBOY Contributing Editor **David Hochman,** who last interviewed Planned Parenthood's Cecile Richards for the magazine, spent a Saturday afternoon with Harris in West Hollywood. Dressed in a button-down shirt, dark blazer and jeans ("picture Ben Stiller as your dissertation advisor," Hochman says), Harris was Zen calm but ready to rile.

"Sam is a true intellectual product of our moment," Hochman says. "He's like a walking version of the internet, except without the annoying video buffering and pop-up ads. He harbors no regrets but admits to imbuing some of his arguments with 'a little too much topspin.' He can come off serious at first, but once he gets rolling, he's dazzling as a thinker who's fearless in his beliefs and also quite persuasive. He'll present an idea on culture, politics or sex that makes you go, 'Wait—no, no.' But hear him out and you often find yourself thinking, Okay, I see your point. So it made sense to start with a question about the points that people tend to miss."

PLAYBOY: For a mild-mannered guy, you inspire an unusual amount of controversy with your views, whether it's suggesting that IQ might differ across races and ethnic groups, supporting the use of torture or saying you would get rid of religion before getting rid of rape. What do people get wrong about you?

HARRIS: I'm interested in how we think about problems and how we can talk about them, right? My interest in the thing I'm talking about is often one level removed from the thing I'm actually talking about. It's like a meta level of interest, but I'm being mistaken as somebody who is just really interested in that thing. Let's take torture: My interest is not in torture per se. I'm interested in ethical bedrock. Now, to even entertain the efficacy of torture brands you as a moral monster, but the cost of doing business in times of war demands that we get it right. In ethical terms, the collateral damage of dropping bombs could be far worse than, say, a case of justifiable waterboarding. The same goes for the conversation about race and IQ. My interest is not in measuring intelligence, much less measuring differences in intelligence between groups. I have zero interest in that. I am concerned about the free-speech implications of where we're going with all this and the fact that people like the political scientist Charles Murray are being de-platformed in the pursuit of intellectual honesty on the subject.

The example I often use is, if we want to get to ethical bedrock, we should be able to say things like "Why can't you eat babies? There are sometimes extra babies in the world, and they're full of protein. Can't we eat them?" This is not a conversation about eating babies; this is a conversation about how you can close the door to this idea that we both recognize as repellent and why we recognize it that way. But there are people out there who will say, "Hey, Sam Harris is that guy who wonders why we can't eat babies."

PLAYBOY: Or the guy who once wrote, "It's difficult to imagine a set of beliefs more suggestive of mental illness than those that lie at the heart of many of our religious traditions."

HARRIS: You can always find a case where it's hard to see the downside to somebody's religiosity if it's innocuous, if it's not linked up with any political program that's going to impose misery on other people or infringe on their rights. But an understanding of the world that is based on the infallible word of God requires a kind of willful ignorance—bordering on madness—of history, science, common sense and human decency. For true believers it's not just "It makes me feel good to pray" or "Honor thy father and thy mother." They also believe things about the status of gay people or, in the extreme case, what should happen to people who don't believe as they do. They apply biblical thinking to wildly complex modern problems. Climate change? That's not something you need to worry about when you're waiting for the Messiah. Granted, there are wonderful people who are helped by their religion in some local circumstances. I would never dispute that. I would simply say that there are rational alternatives that don't link up with anything that's divisive with respect to a modern understanding of the world. In fact, I think this problem of religious sectarianism is fueling the energy of partisanship that's so strong right now in politics and elsewhere.

PLAYBOY: So our cultural divide is not a problem of left versus right?

HARRIS: Even when it's not religious, we divide ourselves into religious sects. You've picked your house of worship and it's very hard to see what's wrong with your unshakable faith. And of course it's all too easy to see what's wrong with the other side, so you get into us versus them versus them versus them, and it never ends.

PLAYBOY: Do you see a pathway to some sort of unity in the Trump era?

HARRIS: I think there are moves to make, which most people now decline, that could make the national conversation infinitely more productive—for instance, by not attacking the straw-man version of your opponent's argument as opposed to what we now call "steel-manning" their argument. You see straw-manning on Twitter every second, and it's led by Trump. People attack your position by misrepresenting your argument, thereby defeating it. Steel-manning is much rarer. It's when you restate your opponent's position in a way that he or she can't find fault with. Your account might even improve their position. "I'm pro-choice and you're pro-life. Let me tell you why I think you're pro-life, and why you're opposed to abortion." At which point the person says, "You said it better than I could." Then you can make an argument against that. That's the only place to start. You have to do the work to understand the other person's point of view. But that's almost never done.

Something I deal with a lot is what I call "leftist mind reading," where people pretend to understand your view or your motives better than you do. So no matter what you say, they engage in a game of telepathy—actually pseudo-telepathy—telling you what you believe even if it's not accurate.

PLAYBOY: You're frequently called out by the left for criticizing Islam.

HARRIS: As a set of ideas, the link between Islam as a religion and suicidal terrorism worries me. But the person on the left who has taken issue with that will say, "Well, actually, you're just racist. You don't like people from the Middle East." Or, "You were born Jewish, and you're just caught up in your own identity politics." God forbid you utter something that's susceptible to the worst possible interpretation, and they'll hold you to that interpretation no matter what else you say. There's no room for "That came out wrong" or "That's not exactly what I meant." In public dialogue today, there's no way to take your foot out of your mouth. There's a lack of charity in these conversations, coming from both sides, where people want to hold each other in this very litigious way to the worst possible reading of whatever they say. Or worse still, they'll lift something out of context to such a degree that it can be reasonably understood to have the exact opposite meaning of what you intended. This is how you score points in the new economy of reputation assault. Any blow you can land, you should land.

PLAYBOY: But why don't these assaults work on Trump himself? The blows don't land. Call him bigoted or sexist or corrupt and his base ratchets up the support.

HARRIS: This has been mysterious to many of us. Trump has managed to gather an audience of people who do not care about all the ways in which he's obviously a morally damaged person. There's something sociopathic about him. He's just malignantly selfish; he lies with a frequency and velocity we have never seen in public life. It's not just that he lies; he is fundamentally hostile to the truth. Most liars lie in a way that pays respect to the norm of truth-telling so as to be undetected. They insert the lie in the logical spot where the piece would complete the puzzle. Trump doesn't care about the puzzle. He lies and then contradicts himself two seconds later. If it gets pointed out, no problem; he just keeps moving forward, and something like tens of millions of grown-ups in the country, according to polls, still think Trump can do no wrong.

Even when it's not religious, we divide ourselves into religious sects.

PLAYBOY: Explain the neuroscience around giving Trump that pass.

HARRIS: Trump comes out of a space in the brain that doesn't represent reality. It's the same space that draws people to professional wrestling. Trump's base doesn't care whether Russia hacked the election; they just like watching the wrecking ball. For the most part, these are people who think the system has screwed them, so any change is something to cheer. That's an intuition I can understand. If your life is terrible and you locate the source of that misery—the media, immigrants, Nancy Pelosi—then disorder from a guy like Trump just feels like it rerolls the dice. Things can only go up from miserable, right?

PLAYBOY: There's some overlap between Trump's base and yours. Right-wing meme lords love you and your cohorts in the Intellectual Dark Web.

HARRIS: First of all, I'm not even sure I could name who is in this so-called IDW. I mean, there are people who occasionally get mentioned as being in it whom I've never heard of or wouldn't want to be associated with. But the core people—Jordan Peterson, Joe Rogan, evolutionary theorist Bret Weinstein and his brother, Eric, who coined the term—are people I enjoy having conversations with. To me it's a tongue-in-cheek concept that others are more attached to than I am.

The response to it is informatively deranged, because it has been attacked not just as right-wing but as a fascist cabal—like right of right. And yet I believe virtually everyone in the group is center or left of center or even well left of center. I would put myself at left of center. Someone like Bret Weinstein is as left as you can get on every topic. The only actual conservative I can think of is Ben Shapiro, and Ben and I disagree about almost everything. He's an Orthodox Jew, he's not in favor of gay marriage, and he questions climate change. But he's committed to the same rules of intellectual honesty and to the same principles of charity with regard to other people's positions. And yeah, some of my views and criticisms can definitely be attractive to certain people on the right who are looking to put another arrow in their quiver, but those people certainly can't listen or read for very long before they become uncomfortable with the other things that I believe.

PLAYBOY: You believe liberals are too soft on defending America's borders.

HARRIS: National borders make sense. Open borders would be a catastrophe. The moment you admit that you want borders, then you need a real information system that tracks everyone who comes across those borders, because you don't want to let in jihadis. You don't want to let in people carrying Ebola from a trip abroad. You need to know where people have been and why they were there and who they are, down to whether they have their vaccinations. And all of this, in principle, is coercive: It's backed up by guns. There's somebody standing there with a gun who is not going to let you jump the turnstile at passport control. Now, on the left, nobody wants to hear this. They basically say, "You are a racist asshole if you want to keep anyone out." And if that is the view on questions

like that, I think we're guaranteed four more years of Trump, because at least half of our society has run out of patience with that.

PLAYBOY: How can the left get its groove back?

HARRIS: We have to become decoupled from identity politics and political correctness. There's this growing assumption that you can voice a strong opinion about a segment of the population only if you are part of that segment. If I'm a white guy and the conversation turns to the topic of race and violence, it would be considered unseemly for me to offer a solution to the problem of crime in Chicago. That's insane. The shootings in Chicago are just off the charts; it's a war zone. Whatever the solution is, it likely has to do with generic enough factors of sociology and economics and policing that people should be able to talk about it regardless of the color of their skin. Whatever is true is true, and let the best idea win. But the idea that you have no standing to talk about these excruciating social problems unless you've personally suffered them? In fact, that's exactly backward. If you have personally suffered these things, very likely you're not the best person to talk about them. That's what we mean by bias. As a survivor of rape, only I can talk about rape. Well, no, as a survivor of rape, let's talk about how traumatized you've been by rape, and then we get into a very different conversation. Social policy is probably not best engineered by people who are so close to the problem that it has destroyed their lives. It's all they can think about. They have no other perspective. They don't want to hear another perspective.

PLAYBOY: Isn't the point to give voice to social groups that have been traditionally silenced or marginalized because of their race, gender, religion, oppression and so on?

HARRIS: The problem is that public discourse is turning into an exercise in confirmation bias. With identity politics, you find your side of the argument and silo yourself in. It has become a kind of victimology that I describe as the unhappiest game of Dungeons & Dragons: You and all your people have these victim points in a sort of grievance Olympics. Your points trump other points, and that's one reason we're so politically dysfunctional. The left eats itself in a way that the right doesn't. If someone makes the slightest misstep, they're destroyed by the left-wing mob that is more woke than they are. There are literally cases of a Latina feminist lesbian professor not being woke enough for her students because she wants to keep teaching the classical Western canon. And this person essentially gets burned as a witch for not being left of left of left of left.

PLAYBOY: Do you see any downside to the #MeToo movement?

HARRIS: I'm 100 percent in favor of the core of the #MeToo movement. There are guys who have been behaving terribly, rapists and criminals who should be in prison. And then there's this other area of intolerable sexual harassment and crudeness for which there has traditionally not been much of a sanction. Now there is, and that's all good, right?

PLAYBOY: Is there a *but*?

HARRIS: But there's a lot of confusing stuff to work out. Where are the boundaries? What's the difference between somebody with Asperger's who just doesn't know how to flirt and somebody who's a scary harasser? That could be difficult to sort out in an office. We're still trying to navigate in this space, but I'm worried that the totally rational, ethical, defensible subset of concerns here is now an island in a sea of moral panic that's going to do immense harm to good people.

I'm not even sure I could name who is in the IDW. To me it's a tongue-in-cheek concept.

There are the monsters on one side, where we have Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein. They belong in prison. But then we've got Al Franken, who maybe is guilty of something worth worrying about, but it's definitely not what the first guys did. And then over here we have Aziz Ansari, where it's not even clear that this was anything other than a bad date. Things get more innocuous still when somebody makes a joke that two years ago everyone would have laughed at, and now this person's worried about their career. Matt Damon said clearly that we have to make these distinctions, and for that he experienced a tsunami of pushback, which ended with him apologizing: "I'm not going to say anything more about this ever again." Right. I mean, if Matt Damon isn't secure enough in his career to not have to apologize for a completely reasonable thing, we have a problem, because he should be unsinkable.

Or let's look at Louis C.K., one of the funniest comics we've ever had, who's now dealing with #MeToo accusations. I think he was unlucky in the timing. Everyone was viewing his situation through the lens of Harvey Weinstein.

PLAYBOY: Several women accused Louis C.K. of masturbating in their presence. Isn't this another case of a celebrated male thinking that when you're a star you're allowed to do anything?

HARRIS: Well, unless there's something I don't understand about Louis C.K.'s situation, it seems nobody was coerced and nobody felt they couldn't leave the room. Yes, the problem comes when there's a power imbalance. The worst situation would be if he tried to do something to harm somebody's career or discourage them from talking. That would be nefarious. But if you're just talking about a guy who's got this masturbation fetish and he's asking people if he can masturbate in front of them and they say yes and he does it, that's a world away from what is alleged about Harvey Weinstein. So then what happens to someone like Louis C.K.? Starve to death and never work again?

PLAYBOY: Do you think Roseanne should still have a TV job after her tweet last year comparing black Obama aide Valerie Jarrett to an ape?

HARRIS: There it's harder. There are so many variables. Roseanne clearly was dealing with some mental health issues, popping Ambien all the time. If you saw her conversation in the aftermath with Joe Rogan you know she's dealing with lots of chaos. You don't know exactly whose thumbs were on her phone. She also claimed quite credibly that she didn't even know Valerie Jarrett was black. Like, if you google Valerie Jarrett and look at the photos that come up, it's not entirely obvious she's black. That's plausible. For me, strangely, the racism here is in the mind of the person interpreting the tweet. It's like, okay, so you're saying that black people look like apes? That's how you're going to read this? Because if Roseanne called her a horse, I think we wouldn't be having this conversation.

PLAYBOY: But there are tropes in our culture that signify deeper meaning. There's a history of African Americans being compared to apes and monkeys.

HARRIS: But that wasn't necessarily what was in the mind of Roseanne at that moment. Or let's look at what happened with Megyn Kelly getting fired by NBC. I don't know Megyn Kelly; I don't know what her actual beliefs are, but she tried to have a conversation about Halloween and why you can't go out in blackface. She said, "When I was a kid, you could paint your face if you wanted and go out as Diana Ross." Apparently she didn't know that statement was

radioactive. The term *blackface* didn't link up in her mind with minstrel shows and all this other stuff in our culture we're right to be very critical of. She just meant that if you're dressing up as a character, light- or dark-skinned, why can't you put makeup on to make yourself look like that character? That should absolutely be something we're able to talk about on television. And you either have a good argument or you don't. Kelly can then say, "No, that's not what I meant. It's horrible. The racism, the KKK—I disavow all of that." Instead it becomes "You said you're okay with blackface!" Even with a hostage-style apology, Megyn Kelly was doomed, which I think is wrong. I think in principle you should be able to come back from anything as long as you can show the path you took that has made you a different person. We need to have a better process for this. People who were murderers or neo-Nazis can talk about how they're different now, and that becomes valuable in deprogramming other people.

PLAYBOY: What about all these fallen priests accused of being pedophiles?

HARRIS: That's a super hard case. Pedophilia presumably has some neurological underpinning that we don't yet understand. It's interesting to notice that if we did understand its genetics and its neuroanatomy, then we could cure it, right? Maybe it turns out that every pedophile you've ever met has this special case of epilepsy, and if we could just zap this one part of the temporal lobes, they would be done. They might be gay, they might be straight, maybe they don't like kids, but they feel the exact same way about pedophilia that you do, which is that it's bad. We've got to solve that problem. Then we could just treat people and there would be no moral judgment at all.

But because we're not there, we have this hugely moralistic way of thinking about it. In the case of the Catholic Church you have an institution that is cynically protecting its reputation by moving these people from parish to parish, knowing they're going to revictimize kids. You've got an institution with billions of dollars suing people into silence. The church is bankrupting people who they know are legitimate victims, trying to discredit them on the witness stand and then gloating about their success. We have their files where they say, "We won even though we knew the cases to be legitimate." It's the quintessence of evil.

PLAYBOY: By the way, do you remember the moment when you determined that God doesn't exist?

HARRIS: Growing up, I was an atheist who didn't know I was an atheist. I just thought religion was a sham and it was either crazy people, epileptics or liars who had managed to give birth to these institutions. I had read Bertrand Russell but didn't know anything about organized atheism in the United States. Madalyn Murray O'Hair [founder of American Atheists] was not a name I would have recognized. But I was raised in a secular household where there was no talk of religion. I remember in my Great Works class at Stanford, which you had to take freshman year, we read the Bible. I remember haranguing the teacher: With all the great books we could read, why are we reading Leviticus? This is not the best of anything. It's not the best philosophy; it's not the best writing. It's just ancient rigmarole that shouldn't be informing our lives.

PLAYBOY: Whoever wrote the Bible should get at least some credit for a best-seller that has been charting for thousands of years. Don't those stories matter?

The universe may not care about us, but it's not out to get us. The sky really is the limit.

HARRIS: The Bible is just an accident of history. All these religious texts are just books that survived. I mean, someone had to win. We've got Plato, Socrates and Aristotle too, but does that mean they were the three best minds of that generation in Athens? Well, not necessarily. There could have been three other people who just didn't get written about or whose books burned in the fire at Alexandria. It's just historical contingency how we got what we got, and rather than fixate on that legacy, we should be equipping ourselves to produce the best ideas that we can. There are good parts of the Bible, things worth keeping. The Golden Rule is good—let's keep that. But that appeared in other places too.

I mean, the flip side of this is you have to imagine how good a book could be if it were actually written by an omniscient person or deity. Forget omniscience even. If you and I decided today to write something and then broadcast it back 2,000 years, we could easily write something that would be miraculous had it been written 2,000 years ago. But there's nothing like that in the Bible. All we would need to do is put in a paragraph about what we currently know about light and its relationship to electricity, what we currently know about the biological basis of inheritance and DNA, and you could see in a single paragraph that it was a miracle. If someone finds that tomorrow in an urn written in Aramaic, that would prove that the source was a supernatural author. Otherwise we could be doing this with Harry Potter.

PLAYBOY: How did taking ecstasy in college change your view of the divine?

HARRIS: It wasn't until I took MDMA that I realized there are states of consciousness, like the one I just spent six hours experiencing, that explain somebody like Jesus and what it was like to be bowled over by being with him. And that's how you could get a religion or a cult. It didn't reset my views about the veracity of revelation, but it completely changed my sense of what the project was in terms of living a good life, because I knew I wanted to live more that way than how I had intended to live before taking MDMA.

PLAYBOY: What is your drug use like now?

HARRIS: Very rare. I've taken some edibles for sleep of late, with indifferent results. But I can go for years without smoking cannabis. I drink socially.

PLAYBOY: Would you be okay if your young daughters one day experimented with any of these mind agents?

HARRIS: I wrote in my book *Waking Up* that if my daughters don't try at least one psychedelic at some point in their lives, I would think they will have missed a very important rite of passage. I still think that's true, though when the time comes, I'll be wanting to curate that choice a little more heavy-handedly than I let on in that paragraph. I would follow Michael Pollan's admonishment [from his book *How to Change Your Mind*] and take LSD under supervision. It is now becoming more professionalized, with psychotherapists actually doing this work.

PLAYBOY: Were you a nerd in high school?

HARRIS: [*Laughs*] No, I was successfully social in high school. I was a very good student, but I would have fun and party. I would get stoned on the weekends. In retrospect, it seems pretty balanced, though there was probably a little too much binge drinking. It wasn't like the hookup culture you have now, but I had a few serious girlfriends.

PLAYBOY: While we're on sex, what's your view of pornography?

HARRIS: I'm of two minds about it. On the

one hand, it's totally fine and benign. Obviously there should be no laws against it. That's just a straight-up free speech issue. I'm sure there are people working in the industry who are not casualties of it; they're just really into sex and it's a rational way for them to make money. They're not addicted to drugs. They're not being mistreated by anybody. They have healthy relationships. They weren't raped by their stepfathers. It's all fine. It's not part of the symptomology of some immense psychological suffering.

And I'm sure the worst of the worst stories we can imagine are also true, where it's about junkies getting their next fix, people being coerced into situations, sexual slavery. You pull up a video on Pornhub and you don't know what you're looking at. It could be somebody who was kidnapped. This industry makes money based on everyone's fascination with sex, and you could be supporting the worst people on earth who are victimizing people. So that's the reality of the industry.

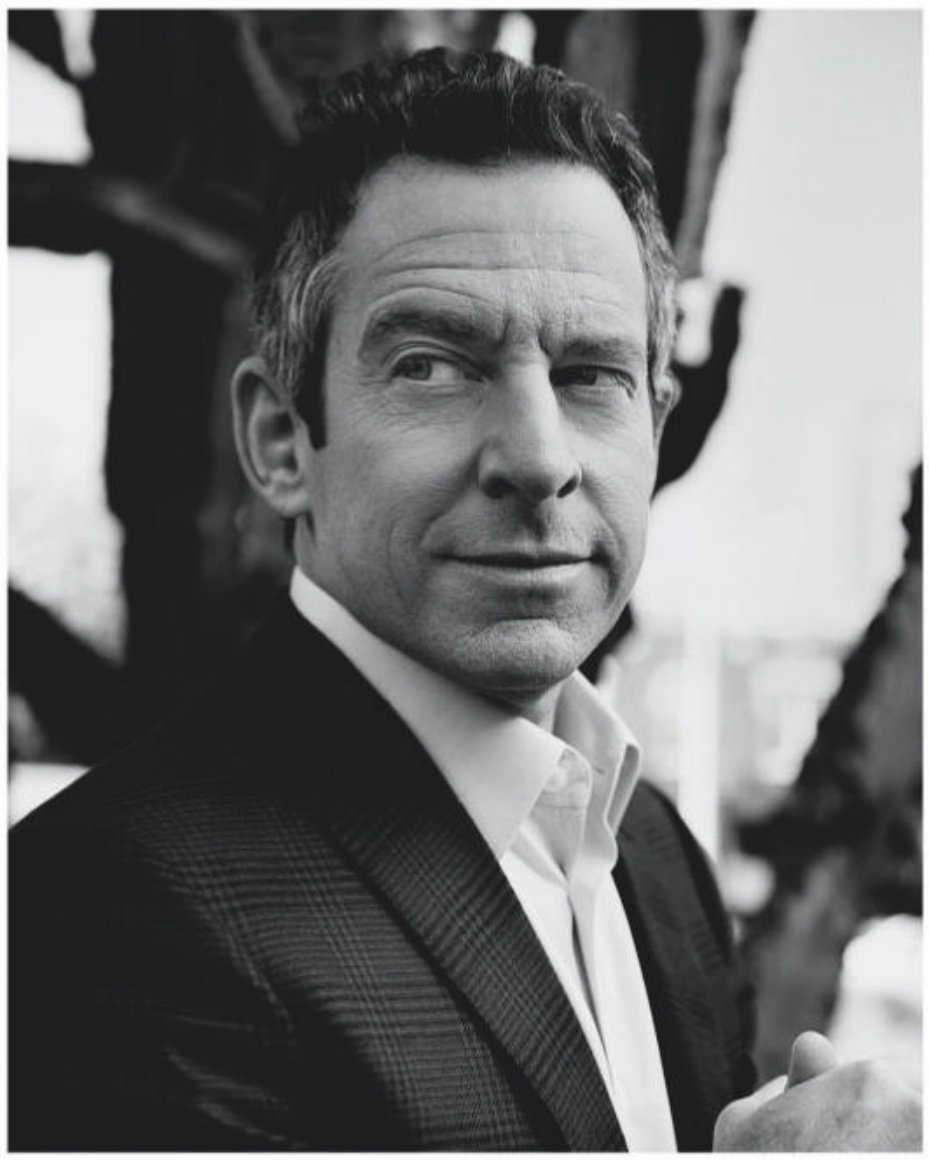
PLAYBOY: What about the user experience?

HARRIS: Well, there are people who can look at pornography and it can be part of a completely healthy sex life, where they have healthy relationships and are happy. Nobody sees it as analogous to cheating on their partner or diminishing their sexual connection. A couple can watch it together and it improves their sex life. That's the healthy version, but then there are obviously people who are addicted, who can't have healthy relationships. It's a stand-in for people who are not able to navigate social connections. And now you have 12-year-olds getting their sexual education by randomly seeing videos of grown-ups doing unthinkable acrobatic and demeaning sex acts. There's something there that's worth worrying about.

As with so much of technology, we're running a psychology experiment on ourselves and we don't know how it's going to come out. It's unnatural to have endless access to imagery of people. Pornography aside, this is something I completely missed in my dating life, but I don't know what Tinder is doing to the prospect of finding meaningful relationships. It gives the sense that there's always someone else behind the person you're considering. It's the paradox of choice, where you're never satisfied because you have endless options.

PLAYBOY: Let's change pace and do a lightning round. Am I wrong for grilling up hamburgers and hot dogs this weekend?

HARRIS: I think factory farming, as generally practiced, is indefensible. I think we should put economic pressure on the system to become as benign as possible. Ultimately that might mean everyone being vegetarian, but I don't think being vegetarian is idiot-proof in terms of human health. I try to support the grass-fed, ecologically sound, cage-free version of everything I eat. And I've actually invested in a start-up



called Memphis Meats, which is cell-culture-based—a so-called clean meat company start-up, which hopefully will get to scale. That would be meat that completely takes the animal out of the equation. You take a single cell from the cow that you want to turn into a steak—it's literally a tiny muscle biopsy—and that then gets amplified and cultured. It's not quite there yet. Last I looked, they had an $18,000 meatball, but apparently it tastes good and their cost is coming down.

PLAYBOY: What are your binge-TV indulgences?

HARRIS: *Game of Thrones, Westworld, Breaking Bad, Mad Men.* I like *Ozark* a lot. Darren Aronofsky, a great filmmaker, has a new show called *One Strange Rock,* which is basically his version of *Cosmos.*

PLAYBOY: Do you have any hidden talents?

HARRIS: I have a black belt in ninjutsu. Remember the ninja? However, that was in the pre-MMA era, when almost every martial art was a pantomime of fake violence. The training was very similar to Krav Maga today—not entirely useless but not 100 percent legit either. More recently, my midlife crisis took the form of getting into Brazilian jujitsu. I'm just a blue belt, though, and I keep getting injured.

PLAYBOY: Kanye West—go!

HARRIS: I was never a Kanye fan and he's a bit chaotic as a political commentator. I do not understand a person who looks at Trump and says, "Yeah, that's exactly what I want my president to be." That's a strange mental space to live in.

PLAYBOY: Favorite Ben Affleck movie?

HARRIS: I thought *Argo* was good. I don't think I saw his last Batman movie. As you know, Ben and I have a checkered history, but I don't have anything bad to say about him as an actor or a director. He's just not a religious scholar.

PLAYBOY: What do you sing in the shower?

HARRIS: I don't really sing. I can chant. Mostly it's Hindu music. I can hang out with the Hare Krishnas.

PLAYBOY: Let's talk about mindfulness, since it's now a big part of your platform. What's your take on the concept?

HARRIS: Mindfulness is about freeing yourself from certain patterns of mind so that you realize you are not your thoughts. I draw this analogy between the mind and kidnappers: It's as though you've been kidnapped by the most boring person on earth and just forced to listen to this guy all day long. Literally, the conversation starts the moment you wake up and doesn't end until you fall helplessly asleep at night. Mindfulness is an alternative to that, but it takes some training to get it. If you can notice a thought as a thought, if you can step back and relinquish your identification with that process and just notice it as a process, as a kind of automaticity in your mind, then you're no longer a hostage.

PLAYBOY: How is your Waking Up meditation app different from all other meditation apps?

HARRIS: If you want to learn to meditate, there are half a dozen apps that will teach you, and they're all well-made. My app is more intrusive. The real purpose of

meditation is to recognize something about the nature of your mind. In the guided meditations I'm trying to get you to realize that, for instance, there's no self in the middle of consciousness. There's no thinker in addition to the thoughts that arise in your mind. Traditionally, that has been the very center of the bull's-eye in a Buddhist meditation practice and for practitioners. But it's something you can spend a lot of time meditating on and not notice.

PLAYBOY: Who is on your dream list of podcast guests?

HARRIS: I'd like to talk to Ed Witten, the physicist other physicists will tell you is the smartest physicist they've ever met. Filmmaker Deeyah Khan is a Muslim woman who made a documentary on white supremacy in the U.S. She's like Kryptonite for neo-Nazis because she's a gorgeous woman of color those guys want to bond with, but then she says, "Wait a minute. You want to throw me out?"

I would also consider talking to some quintessentially bad people just to see if there's an interesting ethical conversation to be had. The Unabomber might be too far gone, but it would be fascinating to actually get into the head of someone like Bernie Madoff and try to figure out why he did what he did and what he thinks about it now. There's a kind of uncanny valley phenomenon that happens ethically, where if you make someone bad enough, it's fine to talk to them. Like you can interview Osama bin Laden or Hitler—great, no problem. You don't have to waste time signaling to your audience, "Well, listen, I didn't support Auschwitz." But if you were to have Richard Spencer on your podcast, then you've given a platform to a dangerous asshole. That's an interesting problem for me to navigate.

PLAYBOY: What do you most want to know about the future?

HARRIS: I'm very interested in the revolution we're on the cusp of right now with intelligent machines and the way they're going to transform our life. I can't wait to see the implications of the outsourcing and improvement of our understanding of ourselves as we become more cyborg than we already are. When I look at how dependent I am on my phone, I can't even remember what it was like to arrange to meet someone in public. "I'll meet you at three." And if that person didn't show up? You would call their answering machine and hope they'd call in to check their messages. Now we just expect to connect with everyone instantaneously.

There are going to be so many binary changes like that, and I think they're going to get weirder and weirder. The current picture of immunology, for example, is that we're basically always getting cancer and we're always fighting cancer. Cancer is just a sort of background noise problem we're always dealing with. But at a certain point you might have nanobots detecting cancer. You'll be able to look at your phone and see what your cancer levels are. We'll look back on cancer the way we now look back on polio, as something that was absolutely terrifying.

The fact is, with so many things we don't even know to ask the question because we can't imagine what the shape of the answer would be. It's not crazy to think that we could be among the last generations for whom aging is the default reality. I'm reasonably persuaded that you can view aging as a kind of engineering problem that can be solved. This is gerontologist Aubrey de Grey's argument. We may not get there in our lifetimes or our kids' lifetimes, but at a certain point you solve the problem. The universe may not care about us, but it's not out to get us. And so there are problems we can solve that will stay solved. The sky really is the limit, which in that context will make getting hit by a bus or a flying car that much more anomalous and horrible.

The truth is I'm agnostic about the afterlife part. Certain very strange things are possible.

It's one of the reasons I think the left is so poised for embarrassment—because political correctness and identity politics and victimology can't survive contact with all the information that's coming from big data and genetics. We're going to be inundated with information about human difference, but politically we know what the right answer is. Separating ourselves by identity can't matter. We know we want political equality; we're anchored there. So when we look for mean differences in populations, we're guaranteed to stumble upon facts that are politically inconvenient.

PLAYBOY: Like the fact that we're all basically the same.

HARRIS: That's right. There are just lucky people and there are unlucky people, and we should be compassionately concerned about disparities in luck and trying to create systems that make it effortless for us to collaborate in ways that make the world better for everyone. We can't rely on people to be saints or even want to become saints. We have to enshrine what people will agree to in the wisest moments at the level of our institutions and our laws and our systems so that in our weaker moments, when we're selfish or bored or filled with anger or anxiety, we're still running on rails and going in the right direction.

PLAYBOY: Incidentally, what if you're wrong about God and the afterlife?

HARRIS: The truth is I'm agnostic about the afterlife part. I don't know how consciousness arises, and therefore I don't know if by definition it ceases when we die. I mean, we just don't know. Certain very strange things are possible. It's possible that we are in some kind of computer simulation right now. There are not-crazy arguments that could lead you to be open about that. Philosopher Nick Bostrom's simulation argument is that we're intelligent enough creatures to produce intelligent machines, and eventually, if we don't kill ourselves first, we will produce simulated worlds in these simulated machines filled with creatures with a level of consciousness as it is in our human brains. And we'll get better and better at this, and at a certain point simulated worlds by definition will outnumber real worlds—and not just by a small number, because there's only one real world out there. They'll outnumber the real world by trillions and trillions of times. So then you have to ask yourself if it is more likely that you're in a real world or a simulated world. Then you can add alien civilizations, and we're in a kind of computational space. Once the simulations get good enough, we can't expect to know the difference between simulation and reality. That's a way of talking yourself into assuming that it's quite possible you're in something like the Matrix already. If that's true, well, then what would it mean to believe in God, and are we on the hard drive of some alien supercomputer?

PLAYBOY: Either way, do you plan on being cremated?

HARRIS: I don't know. I don't think it's in my will. For some reason, I have a bias for burial just because I like the idea. I like cemeteries. I guess you could spread someone's ashes, but it's nice having a place where people can go to think about the person.

PLAYBOY: What would you like it to say on your tombstone?

HARRIS: A big number—1967 to 2267. ■

"I never know what to do with myself at these events."

Playmate Review

Representing far-flung locales from Moscow to Mexico City to Mesa, Arizona, last year's Playmates are as diverse as they are radiant. On the following pages you'll meet a vet tech, a former art dealer, a café owner, a medium in training—and you'll face the sweet agony of deciding for yourself which of these extraordinary women should become our 2019 Playmate of the Year. We'll reveal the winner in our Spring 2019 issue

APRIL

Nereyda Bird

"I never really felt connected to the word *sexy*. I think it's a bit vulgar. I get that Nereyda is supposed to be some 'sexy model,' but it's not about me feeling sexy; it's just me feeling comfortable."

FEBRUARY

Megan Samperi

"I like going fast. I drive like a dude—one hand on the wheel, a leg up, chilling with my music. All my dude friends are actually scared of me driving."

MARCH

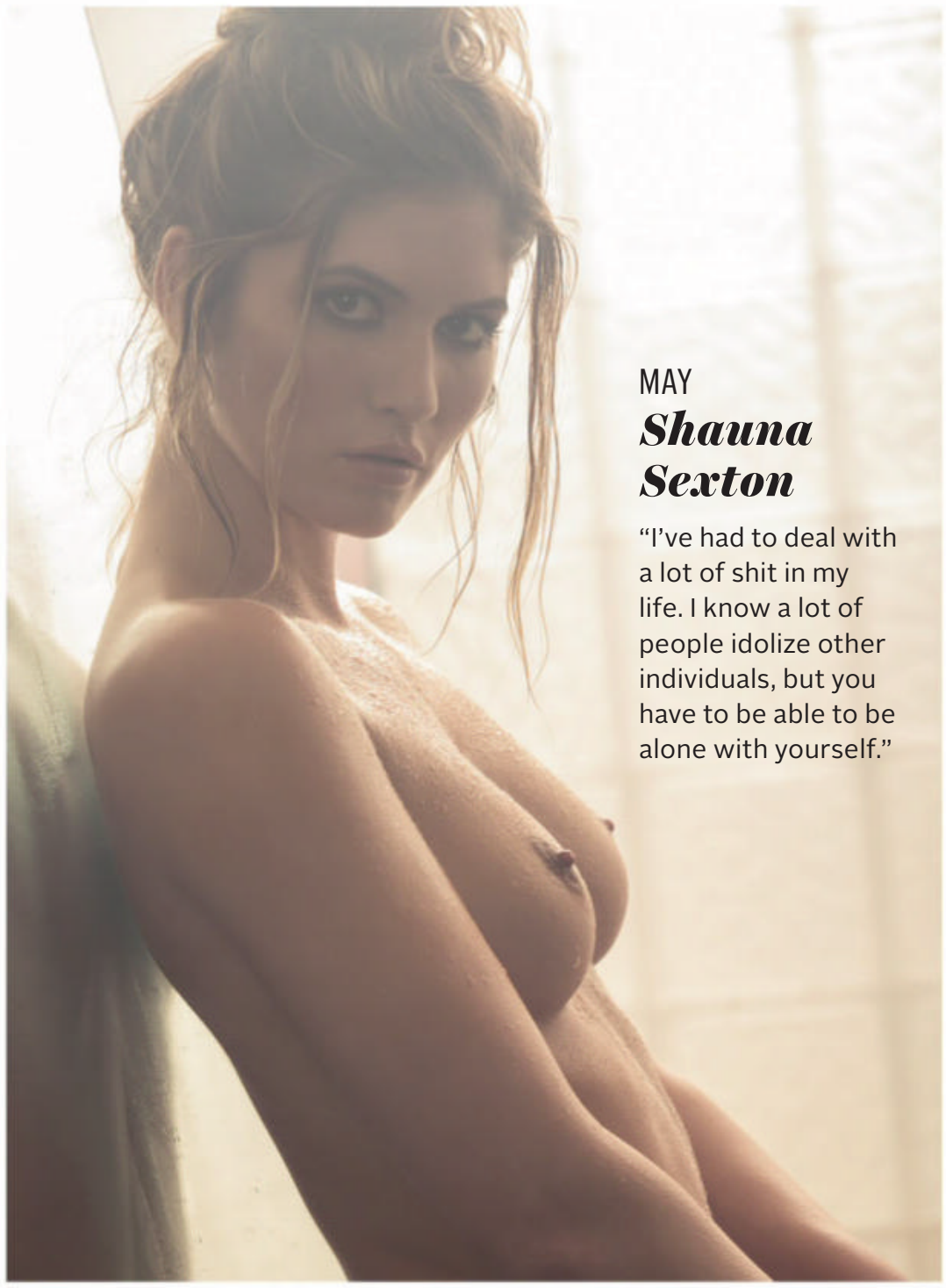
Jenny Watwood

"I'm all natural—my eyelashes, hair, boobs. My lips are just puffy, and I have smile lines because I laugh all the time. These lines have great memories in them—I'm not doing anything to change them."

OCTOBER

Olga de Mar

"Feeling feminine and showing weakness is beautiful to me. Only a strong woman can show herself to be weak, and the same goes for men."



MAY

Shauna Sexton

“I’ve had to deal with a lot of shit in my life. I know a lot of people idolize other individuals, but you have to be able to be alone with yourself.”

JUNE

Cassandra Dawn

“I believe in letting your elegance come through. Every woman has a different type of sexiness she likes to exude, and for me, subtlety speaks louder. I like to leave a little to the imagination—most of the time.”

DECEMBER

Jordan Emanuel

“Our country is called the United States, but we’re not that united. I think we need to let people live however they choose to. Let’s appreciate our differences. If we took the time, we’d learn a lot.”

JANUARY

Kayla Garvin

“I want to make sure I don’t look back with major regrets. Sometimes you get so caught up in the mundane everyday things, you forget to slow down. Life is short. You have to relax and enjoy it.”

AUGUST

Lorena Medina

“Take it off! I’ve always felt comfortable with no clothes on. It’s freeing, it’s liberating and, most of all, it’s who you are in your natural state, so why not?”

JULY

Valeria Lakhina

"I just like talking to people—friends in the world of psychology, from my camera crew, yoga teachers. I love having long conversations about human nature."

SEPTEMBER

Kirby Griffin

"People sense when you're open and truthful. Stay true to yourself, treat people the way you want to be treated and wake up grateful every day."

NOVEMBER

Shelby Rose

"I'm pretty open. I like to try things. I'm not one of those people who are like, 'I'm just going to sit in my square little life.'"

WHEN SPIRITUALITY *Goes Viral*

Meet the magnetic young man who's using social media to upgrade humanity—and whose Insta-pulpit threatened to crumble after the death of a follower

ILLUSTRATION BY
DAN BEJAR

He appears on the screen, calling from an undisclosed location.

His name is Bentinho Massaro, and as far as young New Age leaders go, he's a sensation. I've been watching his YouTube videos, which have netted more than 10 million collective views. He's on a stage in Sedona or Maui or his native Netherlands. A crowd of hundreds gathers at his feet. He sits in the lotus position, hands folded in his lap. He is blond and delicately handsome, and he speaks with a slight accent. He wears mostly loose-fitting yoga clothes, as if he might break into a flawless downward dog at any moment, and he exudes an energy that his followers, whom he calls Wanderers, seem to find magnetic, even hypnotic.

BY **JESSE HYDE**

He agrees to talk with me on Skype about his teachings and the controversy that surrounds him. He is going to scan me, he says, to get a sense of my intentions.

Massaro is part of a new generation of spiritual teachers who use social media to spread their message and gain followers. There are shamans who lead retreats for Silicon Valley executives and swamis who can read your chakras over Skype. Their ranks include Audrey Kitching, the pink-haired model and crystal-healing muse with more than 500,000 followers across Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, and Amy Woodruff, the kundalini yoga instructor who rocketed to fame after posting a picture of herself doing a headstand while breast-feeding her daughter.

At 30 years old, Massaro is a master of digital spirituality. He has a slickly designed website offering online courses on enlightenment, a YouTube channel with more than 75,000 subscribers and a Facebook page with more than 300,000 likes.

Like Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh with his scores of Rolls-Royces, Massaro seems to have no interest in eschewing the good life. He posts photos of himself hanging out with his girlfriend, free-diving off the coast of Bali and rock climbing in Colorado. He can be seen admiring his ripped physique and savoring whiskey and cigars, all of it interspersed with messages of positive affirmation and limitless possibility.

In the world of New Age teachers, he was the next big thing. And then something called the Sedona Experiment II went horribly wrong.

There was a death, a police investigation, physical threats. Online, his critics called him "Steve Jobs meets Jim Jones," a reference to the notorious Peoples Temple leader who led a mass murder-suicide in 1978. Massaro tells me this insinuation is absurd. He is misunderstood. He is on a mission to help civilization upgrade. And because he is a disrupter, blowback is inevitable. He asks why I want to write about him. "It's going to take a lot of your time and you're going to delve into a world that perhaps is fairly new to you," he says.

Massaro engages with a participant at a retreat in Maui, Hawaii.

I explain that I grew up in the Mormon Church and that after experiencing a crisis of faith a few years ago I've been on a spiritual journey of my own. I'm intrigued by his teachings and want to learn how he gained his devout following.

He nods slowly, and I sense he understands me, even though we're a generation apart and have little in common. There's a look of compassion in his eyes. I find my skepticism dissipating ever so slightly. And then he starts gazing at me with an intensity I've seen him summon in his videos. When he does this onstage, it can last for 10 minutes, sometimes longer. A slight smile will appear on his lips, as if he has sensed the aura of whomever he's gazing at, and it pleases him. With me, it lasts for only a moment, but I wonder what he sees within me.

I tell him I'd like to meet him and his team, who help him with graphic design and video production. I want to understand why people have abandoned lovers, homes and careers to follow him. I want to understand instagrammable spirituality.

I also want to know if he's a misunderstood teacher, as he insists, or a cult leader for the digital age, espousing dangerous concepts that can lead people to their deaths.

What I don't tell him is that I'm also wondering if he can help me.

• • •

According to Massaro, his origin story goes something like this: He was born and raised in a middle-class neighborhood of Amsterdam, not far away from its famous canals, tulips and 15th century homes. His father worked for an energy company and his mother taught elementary school, and they endured what Massaro, an only child, describes as "bouts of poverty," when he sometimes went hungry.

From an early age he felt he was special, extraordinary even, both blessed and burdened with a message he had to share with the world. He says that at school he was known affectionately as "the weird kid" with one of the highest IQs in class even though he was a lazy student. He was more interested in telekinesis: He tells me he would spend class periods trying to move straws or pieces of foil across his desk with his mind.

His parents were undergoing a spiritual awakening of their own thanks in part to the Silva Method, a self-help meditation program popular in the 1960s. They believed they could use it to train their minds to control objects, view distant locations and, eventually, connect with a higher intelligence. They enrolled Massaro in a children's course, which he says he quickly mastered.

"It resonated as home for me," Massaro

says. "I always knew I'm a superhero. I always knew everyone can do anything they want."

He began reading Deepak Chopra, ancient scripture and yogic philosophy. He became particularly fascinated by *The Law of One,* a series of books purportedly conceived by a non-human intelligence named Ra. He also absorbed the basic teachings of nonduality, or the idea that the universe is one substance and we're all a part of it, whether we call that substance awareness, consciousness or even God—a concept at the core of some Buddhist strains and everything from Jewish kabbalah and Christian mysticism to *The Matrix*. Visions of India began popping into his head, and at 18, he and his then girlfriend decamped for Rishikesh, the birthplace of yoga and much of the Beatles' "White Album." He lived in the country for six months, riding rickshaws, hopping from one hostel to another, meeting with swamis, and practicing yoga and meditation.

"It was a Buddha-like quest," he tells me. "The Buddha said at some point after seeking, 'I won't get up from under this tree until I'm enlightened, until I've found what I'm looking for,' and it was kind of a similar result."

Not long after he got back to the Netherlands, Massaro began posting videos on YouTube, sharing what he'd found. He quickly gained a following because of what he describes as his ability to distill centuries of wisdom into concepts anyone can understand.

"For the advanced seeker I am a breath of fresh air, or the teachings are a breath of fresh air, because they've never heard it so clearly before," he tells me. "If you had researched all these philosophies and practices—anyone who has agrees that my teaching is genius."

His fame spread to the United States, and in 2011 he was invited to speak at the Science and Nonduality Conference, an event that draws such New Age luminaries as Chopra and Adyashanti. A few years later he was featured on an audio series produced by Sounds True, the company that publishes the audio and video teachings of Eckhart Tolle. But the more time Massaro spent with other gurus, the more disillusioned he became.

"I had attained greater clarity and purity of mind than most of these other teachers," he says. "Now it was like, Well, wait a second—it's up to me. It was really powerful to realize that if I want to change the world, if I want to upgrade spirituality, I'm the one who has to do that."

Massaro says he clashed with other spiritual teachers because he was drifting outside standard nondual teachings and talking about the law of attraction, popularized by the book *The Secret,* which holds that we have the power to bring into our lives anything we focus on, good or bad. As Massaro started blending that idea with Eastern philosophies such as Advaita Vedanta, he says he was disinvited from conferences. His Sounds True interview was taken down.

"I ALWAYS KNEW I'M A SUPERHERO. I ALWAYS KNEW EVERYONE CAN DO ANYTHING THEY WANT."

But none of this slowed his rise. By 2016, videos he'd posted on YouTube were getting thousands of views. He had moved to Boulder, Colorado, which has been described as the "New Age's Athens." Seated at the base of the eastern scarp of the Rockies, the city is home to the first Buddhist-inspired college in America. It's the sort of place where you'll find ads for psychic reprogrammers and past-life-regression experts. Massaro rented an office downtown and assembled a team who understood video editing, web design and social media. He launched Bentinho Massaro TV, a subscription-based repository of his teachings. The followers he gained online were encouraged to attend his retreats, which have cost $5,000 for nine days.

In early 2017 Massaro decided to move his operation to Sedona, Arizona, another New Age mecca. Wanderers who had quit jobs to follow him to Boulder moved with him, fanning out across the city to rent homes and attend his regular talks, which he also live-streamed, at the Sedona Creative Life Center.

He started hosting retreats in luxurious resorts, surrounded by followers so devoted he says he had to hire bodyguards and lay down a rule: If he was wearing sunglasses between sessions, attendees shouldn't approach him. The whiskey-and-cigars posts began to dot his feed. He says his team was bringing in up to $120,000 a month.

As Massaro's following grew, his teachings became more grandiose. In one interview he said he didn't want to have children because he already had 7 billion of them: "The people of this world are my children."

He claimed that he had the power to teleport, levitate and move mountains—that he was an "upper-density spirit" who had descended to the earth to help civilization upgrade. "My vision is to buy a large, amazing piece of land and to start a new city of sorts with all of you and a teaching like mine as a focal point," he said during a talk at the Sedona Creative Life Center. "There's amazing potential to live in a new way and to create a little pocket that is an initial example of what is possible for all of humanity. So I see it as a flower popping up through the mud."

In the fall of 2017 Massaro started to talk about a new retreat, called the Sedona Experiment II. He had already held the first Sedona Experiment with about a dozen of his most devoted disciples. To market the sequel, which he wanted to expand to more than 100 followers, he bought the domain name sedonaexperiment.com and posted a short video trailer in which he explains that he's shifting his followers' "sense of identity from being human to being not human" and eventually arriving at a place called "infinite consciousness."

By this point, the Sedona police had begun to get complaints. Sedona is a small city of about 10,000 people, and it relies heavily on tourism. Of its nearly 3 million annual visitors, some come to browse the downtown galleries or to hike or mountain bike, but thousands come to visit the vortices, get their auras photographed or cleanse their chakras. Sedona has also attracted its share of fanatics and cult leaders. In 2010 there was a noticeable drop in visitors after a celebrated guru named James A. Ray presided over a sweat-lodge ceremony near Sedona that had resulted in three deaths the previous year.

According to reporting by *The Arizona Republic,* there were now similar complaints about Massaro. Someone told the Sedona police chief that Massaro encouraged his followers to live on nothing more than grape juice for weeks at a time. (The

Sedona police declined PLAYBOY's interview request.) He had encouraged his followers to cut off ties to friends and family if they got in the way of enlightenment, and to look forward to their own deaths. "Don't fear death; be excited about it," he says with a smile in one video. He said he was unafraid of his own death and once wrote, "Looking forward to death makes you truly come alive."

"Wake up to something important," he says in another clip. "Otherwise, kill yourself.... Make that agreement every day: You either kill yourself or you dedicate yourself to something important."

Before long, a detective would be repeating those words back to him.

• • •

A few days before the second Sedona Experiment, an article was published on the blogging platform Medium by an activist and writer named Be Scofield, who had infiltrated Massaro's inner circle. "Tech bro guru has arrived," Scofield writes. "The OS has been upgraded. Cult 2.0 is upon us."

Scofield traces how Massaro had used start-up principles and "growth-hacker marketing" to build a New Age empire. His product was spiritual ideas, and using Facebook and YouTube he could test out this product at no cost, noting what resonated by analyzing clicks. Massaro had also founded something called Trinfinity, Scofield writes, a murky entity that sounds like something from the mind of L. Ron Hubbard or a Batman comic. Trinfinity Corp. had a master plan that would be executed in four phases. It would start with apps, virtual-reality machines, an astral-projection inducer, film and TV studios and a publishing platform, and would culminate with Trinfinity City.

As the second Sedona Experiment began, Massaro took to the stage to address the allegations raised in the article, which included video snippets of Massaro yelling at a female follower and a Facebook post advancing conspiracy theories like Pizzagate.

"It has no context for me," he said of the cult label. "It feels so empty and meaningless. Like, okay, great. Yeah. We're a cult. It doesn't change what we are."

He told those who had gathered for the 12-day retreat that a better label would be a "social memory complex." In the coming days they would grow so close that the electromagnetic fields of their consciousnesses would merge and they would become one, bound by the bliss of enlightenment, and "penetrate the Absolute."

On the seventh day of the retreat, according to the *Republic,* two detectives showed up at Massaro's house to ask him about one of the participants in the Sedona Experiment. His name was Brent Wilkins, a 34-year-old former tennis pro who had drifted in and out of Massaro's inner circle. According to what Wilkins's parents told police, he had quit his job back East and moved to Boulder to follow Massaro. For two years he poured everything he had into finding enlightenment through Massaro's teachings. At one point he had come home at his parents' urging and admitted to a psychiatrist that he sometimes thought of hurting himself. He spent a week in a local psych ward and vowed to stay in Virginia when he got out. They hired a cult-extraction specialist, but before long Wilkins had returned to Boulder.

"I want to go back to your words," detective Chris Stevens said. " 'Wake up and do something important. Otherwise, just kill yourself.' "

"Right," Massaro said.

Massaro recalled that Wilkins had met with him at a party prior to the retreat and expressed his doubts about participating in it. He sometimes had "freak moments" at retreats. But Wilkins was always swinging from doubt to certainty. At the end of the conversation, Wilkins had held Massaro to his chest.

"He's confused, right?" Stevens asked, his voice sharp on a recording later obtained and reported on by *The Arizona Republic.* "He's trying to figure out his life?"

Massaro voiced his agreement.

"And he's not doing anything? What do you think might be the outcome?"

"Um, not that. But I understand. I understand."

And then Stevens told Massaro that Wilkins had killed himself.

"No," Massaro said softly.

Wilkins had been found at the bottom of a 225-foot cliff in Sedona. In his pocket they'd found a name tag: THE SEDONA EXPERIMENT II. PARTICIPANT.

As police decided whether to charge Massaro, the empire he had built began to teeter. (Sedona police ultimately did not press charges.) Followers turned on him. Threatening messages appeared online. He no longer felt welcome in the community that had been his home base for years.

It was as though a dark cloud had moved into Sedona, he tells me, "like a scary movie." The energy had shifted there, and he no longer felt welcome. And so, after careful consideration with his two lovers at the time, they went on the run, revealing their whereabouts and what was next to only a handful of people.

• • •

At the time of our first Skype session, Massaro appears to be still on the run.

There are pictures of him in Hawaii and the Netherlands, in Egypt in front of the pyramids and in the misty jungles of Colombia, meeting with a reclusive tribe called the Kogis. The captions on his Instagram feed are vague, perhaps intentionally so. At times it seems he's ready to retire, and then a post surfaces in which everything he once prophesied still seems possible.

In late August he invites me to visit him in Boulder, suggesting a trendy restaurant off Pearl Street, the downtown pedestrian mall where you can pay for someone to balance and align your energies, buy pot or get smashed among rowdy University of Colorado coeds, who have just arrived for the fall semester.

I've been waiting for half an hour, at a table Massaro has reserved in the back, when I see him enter. He is of average build and carries himself with confidence, scanning the room as though he owns the place. He's flanked by three staffers, the Wanderers I've heard so much about. There's a tall and willowy blonde who left an international modeling career to follow him; a recent University of Colorado grad who helps with writing and graphic design; and an aspiring filmmaker from Florida who helps with videos. I've seen all of them on Massaro's Instagram feed.

"I'VE ASKED MYSELF, IF BUDDHA OR JESUS LIVED TODAY, WOULD THEY HAVE A FACEBOOK PAGE?"

From a September 2017 Instagram post featuring Bentinho Massaro and Sedona's Cathedral Rock. The text of the post concludes, "You realize with unimaginable certainty that you are the One Absolute beyond all Identity."

A November 2017 post promoting the Sedona Experiment II and tagged, in part, #selfrealizationschool and #realizetheabsolute.

Over the next two hours, as the members of his team explain why they've abandoned careers or moved across the country to follow Massaro, their leader sits near the head of the table with a pleased look on his face, cutting in here and there to explain some esoteric spiritual concept. I sense him watching me as he sips his cocktail.

I had expected Massaro to be aloof, that it might take some work to get around the facade of an upper-density spiritual teacher, but in person the so-called tech bro guru seems mostly like a bro. He peppers his conversation with references to comedies like *Wedding Crashers,* laughs about the time he tried out for the Netherlands version of *American Idol* and forgot the lyrics to an Elton John song, and seems delighted to learn little biographical details I tease out about his team.

If he's scanning me again, I'm scanning him too, wondering if he really believes he descended from another planet to help Earth upgrade, as he says in one of his posts. To me, he seems nothing like the sociopathic narcissist who reportedly once told a girlfriend she was disrupting his flow into eternal bliss.

He muses that maybe the best way to spread his message is entirely online. In-person retreats are too messy. People always approach him between the sessions, a tendency both exhausting and tedious.

"It always feels—I wouldn't say scary," he says. "But I can't be personally responsible for every person in a group. I don't know where they come from, their issues."

I ask if he's referring to Brent Wilkins.

"No, not at all. I don't feel responsible for his death. I've always felt this. I know I'm not responsible ultimately. They're responsible for signing up for the retreat, their meditations, how they interpret things I say."

Before long, their attention turns to me. I describe my path out of Mormonism and how it led to a dark period during which I felt an existential void and lack of any sense of meaning. The Wanderers, all in their 20s, nod and smile as if they've been there too and know the secret to my wandering.

Massaro suggests we continue the conversation the next day but instructs me not to call him before noon. He usually stays up all night, he explains, because that's when the "world goes to sleep. All the brains quiet. I can feel the conscious mind drop into the subconscious mind."

We meet the next afternoon at a coffee shop in a suburb of Boulder, where Massaro and his team are living with the parents of one of his followers. He tells me they're looking for a place where they can all live and work together. Without his team, he doesn't seem quite as upbeat, and I think of something I've heard: that he's rarely without at least one of them by his side. Or maybe he's just groggy after staying up all night.

He dodges questions about what they're up to, saying he can't really get into it, and explains how difficult the past year has been for him.

"Friends were turning against me. People were threatening me and my loved ones," he says. "I'm sure famous people get this all the time, like threats on social media, comments, messages, messaging through our site. 'You deserve what's coming for you. Just wait and see.' Or 'You're responsible for Brent's death.' "

On Wilkins's suicide, he offers this: "Maybe it was a powerful moment. I don't know. Maybe it was a super powerful moment. I don't recommend suicide for anyone, but I also don't judge it. I think sometimes, for some people, it is a powerful decision."

I ask if he has ever considered suicide.

"Oh yeah," he replies. "I think every sane person has contemplated suicide every once in a while." Reality is an illusion, he reminds me. Our bodies are too. It's like a video game.

"You're playing a video game. You know it's not really you; it's not ultimately real. The video game ends. If you fall down a cliff, you still exist. You just walk away from the game console and you're fine."

I came here wondering if I could find a sense of peace outside organized religion, trying to be as open as I could to a new sort of spirituality. In one of our Skype sessions, Massaro agreed that he had tapped into the cultural zeitgeist that allowed him to reach people in a way a traditional spiritual teacher no longer could—especially with millennials, the generation least likely to identify with a religious group, according to a Pew Research Center survey.

"I've asked myself, if Buddha or Jesus lived today, would they have a Facebook page?" Massaro says. Instagram in particular is a medium he finds conducive to spirituality. "The pictures have an energy," he explains. "It's why people stare at gurus in the East: They have a certain power."

He says he shows a life of abundance because otherwise millennials wouldn't click on any of his photos. I admit I find some of this confusing: He talks about overcoming

Massaro leads a guided meditation "on the healing and forgiveness of each other and mankind."

attachment and desire, yet he seems to like nice things.

"Is that really what I like, or is that part of the message?" he asks. He compares himself to a martial artist, responding intuitively to what's coming in. The "collective" likes to see pictures of "an epic life," and so he posts them to draw his followers in.

The more he talks, the more worn out I feel. Maybe I don't want to get to the place where all thinking stops, or to feel eternal bliss, or to get beyond consciousness to "the Absolute," an idea that, no matter how long Massaro talks and what kind of diagrams he draws on the napkin before me, I cannot wrap my head around. I think of something the Buddha said, about how the whole point of non-attachment is to get to a place where you don't really care if you're not in a state of bliss or if you have a toothache or if your life just seems really shitty.

After my Boulder trip I call Naomi Melati Bishop, a writer and self-described millennial hippie who has done Mayan steam baths, traveled 10,000 miles tracking down a mystic and become Facebook friends with her shamans. She acknowledges that social media might be great for raising awareness of things like crystal healing or that studio in Brooklyn that offers shamanic purification rituals, but it can also present an inaccurate picture of what it takes to attain something even close to enlightenment.

"Many of these practices are based in Eastern traditions that are thousands of years old, and when you take it out of that context, people are practicing only slivers of the thing itself, so it becomes fragmented and fractured," she says. "People are simultaneously becoming more enlightened and more lost."

I wonder if Massaro would even exist as a spiritual teacher without Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. I also wonder if he'd be doing any of this if he couldn't post about it and track how many likes he gets.

"Ultimately it's about practicing what you post," Melati Bishop says. "Are you living a lifestyle that's aligned with what you're saying? Would some of us still be meditating if we couldn't prove it online?"

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Massaro stays in touch. He texts me on WhatsApp to vent about a documentary on YouTube that makes him look like a cult leader, explaining that he allowed the filmmakers access to a retreat he held in the Netherlands thinking they would portray him fairly. Instead, they spliced together snippets of Massaro saying things like "When you stumble upon a point of view that feels good about someone else being raped, are you willing to accept that point of view?"

The video shows him once again confronting the *C* word: "I don't really have a definition of *cult*. But you could break it down as Curious and Unconditionally Loving Tribe, C-U-L-T. That would be the positive expression of a cult."

Not long after, I'm alerted to a new post on Facebook, this one by Massaro's ex-girlfriend Jocelyn Daher. She describes how Massaro told her he couldn't have sex with her unless she lost weight because fat suggests stored toxins. She describes three months of eating only fruits and vegetables, dry fasting and working out twice a day. On a related blog post, she describes her time with Massaro as "10 months of complete obliteration of everything I knew myself to be." His disciples hovered near him, looking for constant approval, Daher writes, but none of them seemed happy; they all seemed lost.

As their relationship progressed, he told her she was preventing him from accessing his "God-self." "I remember one time he said to me that my mind to him was like having 'a fly in the room.' My 'personhood' seemed to be an annoyance and a hindrance to his 'absorption into the all.' "

In the weeks after I meet Massaro, he continues to post affirming messages, encouraging his then 23,000 Instagram followers to stop doubting themselves and unlock their potential through forgiveness.

But then something shifts. Massaro's posts begin to take on a menacing edge. The week after Daher's piece, he posts videos on Instagram in which he suggests that most people aren't up to the task of pursuing "real spirituality" and don't know what real love is. He posts a picture of another girlfriend, the former model, saying women who think they're oppressed are living in a fantasy world. It seems like a shot at Daher, who described their relationship as oppressive. He tells his critics to get off his page.

"You're mostly blind," he writes in one post on Instagram around that same period. "You're ruining your life; no one else is. Most of you are nowhere near who you truly are."

The comments, many of them negative, start to flood his feed.

I think of the last time I saw him, the two of us sitting outside a coffee shop. I asked him if he ever thought about quitting. He did, he said. Sometimes he just wanted to go "sit on a rock in India." But he wasn't like other spiritual teachers. There was something alive in him. "There's a fire, a passion, a devotion that's willing to die for the cause," he'd told me earlier.

He asked me what I think happens when we die, and I told him I wasn't sure. "I used to think it just fades to black," I said. "The light goes off. We cease to exist."

He nodded, and for a brief moment I saw something I hadn't seen in him before—a crack of doubt. He didn't seem like a New Age guru with all the answers or an enlightened being who had achieved upper-level density, whatever that means. We were just two dudes, sitting outside a strip mall in Colorado, sipping coffee and trying to figure out if any of this had any meaning.

"But now I wonder," I said. "Maybe there is something beyond this."

The light returned to his face, and he nodded with excitement, once again the spiritual teacher so many had found online. It seemed he really believed he could help me, that I too could find eternal bliss and that, if I listened long enough, it would all make sense.

I just had to trust him. ■

REPERCUSSIONS

Mindy fakes everything except her climax

FICTION BY
CHUCK PALAHNIUK

Mindy grabbed the knife. Practiced this she had not. They hadn't rehearsed anything because Benjamin, Benny, was hopeless. If he so much as sneezed it sounded fake.

The Singers had set out a brisket, sliced and everything nice, with the carving knife sticking out at a help-yourself angle. Little pots of different World Market mustards sitting around the platter. The perfect witnesses: the Singers, the Goldblatts, the Futters, the Hartzogs and the Taubmans. That girl, that Myra, from the yoga place, she was there for whatever reason. Mindy waited until Leo Hartzog pointed his camera phone recording Ilene telling some cockamamie story about pitching something to Google. That's when Mindy wrapped her fist around the knife handle. Some stainless steel German job. A Wüsthof brisket slicer. She'd downed only the one dirty martini Len Futter had handed her.

She yanked the knife out of the brisket. Too hard, obviously. Adrenaline would do that. Too fast, to judge from how the brisket toppled. Toppled and rolled, a slab of dead meat batting aside little pots of mustard, ramekins of chopped onions, the brisket escaping the platter and greasing a path across the limed oak table. From West Elm? From Pottery Barn? Before taking a plunge—*blat*—onto poor Yael Singer's cowhide accent rug. A juicy splat that piqued everyone's attention until Mindy swung the serrated blade toward Benny's neck.

She brought the knife down, the dull side not the honed edge, chopping his shoulder. With no more force than an Arthurian queen bestowing knighthood upon him. Reddish Chinese mustard and yellow-brown honey mustard all over the white collar and sleeve of his Perry Ellis dress shirt.

His cow-eyed, slaughterhouse expression—here was something her husband could've faked never had he lived to be Methuselah. With her free hand Mindy caught his wrist and twisted that arm behind his back. Held the knife against the bobble of his Adam's apple and sawed it back and forth. Against the little dots of Benny's shaved beard. She held him the way she'd play a hairy cello. No one noticed, what with mustard on the

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **RIKI BLANCO**

blade, how she was pressing the dull side of the knife against his windpipe, harmless—messy but harmless. Bowing him like a cello. No, no amount of rehearsing could've brought these tears to Benny's eyes or made him keen the way he did. Like a dolphin he sounded, or like some killer whale, keening.

She screamed, "Rape me again, you dirty, penis-stinking bastard, and I'll kill you!" And to Ben's credit he played along with her routine. For his crying, he'd later blame the horseradish. Mixed in some mustard it was, held so close to his tear ducts.

Even in that moment, with the camera phone rolling, Mindy had to wonder who'd served Dylan Thomas those 18 shots of whiskey at the White Horse Tavern. Wondering: Was whoever poisoned Dylan Thomas someone helpful? Or maybe some bartender who yearned to see dead the preeminent Welsh poet of the age. That's where Mindy's head was at: disassociation. Hers was a classic case of disassociation.

Mindy worked the serrated brisket slicer against her husband's throat with the Goldblatts and the Taubmans and the others watching, and she delivered the line they'd agreed upon. A second time, quietly, almost hissing, "Rape me again, you bastard...." This wasn't improvisation. She'd been warning him since Noah's attack. Their performance was all about Noah's attack. And finally Benny recognized his cue.

To his credit, Benny wrapped his strong, sober hand around hers and choked her wrist and rapped her hand, twice, against the Singers' silk wallpaper, until she let go. The knife diving to stab the wood floor at their feet. Chili-infused mustard spattered, red-brown, on the pretty wall.

The scene, like some old-world saying Mindy's long-departed Unka would always say at such a time, this was. Half of what the man said a real person knew to not hear, but on occasion her Unka had been touched like genius.

Yael Singer stooped over the fallen brisket. Her hands hovered above it, hesitated and sprung forward to clamp together on the slab. Her face twisted in a grimace, she hefted the meat and carried it at arm's length like so much butchered...flesh. The awful stain it left, a red puddle, as if Benny had actually bled out. Mindy hadn't been chopping, but they'd seen chopping. Myra from yoga stood with both hands palmed over her mouth. She screamed a moment too late as if meeting some obligation, the silly girl. A thin someone-needed-to-scream scream.

Benny held Mindy's wrist with a power she'd forgotten he had. He'd been conflicted about the rape line, when they'd discussed it. But she was glad to say it twice. Glad for the camera phone. How it might all look in court. In their moment of faked struggle she considered collapsing against him, but the mustard would spoil her vintage Bill Blass. She'd had her hair set that afternoon. The look she was working was *Dynasty*. Like Alexis Colby chopping off Krystle Carrington's head on that one episode of *Dynasty*.

"Yael," Benny said when she brought the coats. He regretted the wallpaper, silk handwoven with green parakeets, from China. He'd told her, "The brisket was delicious."

His shirt smelled so good Mindy had to swallow. On the way home, she made Benny stop for takeout at Arby's.

EVEN IF SHE WERE SEEN, WOULD IT LOOK SO BAD TO BE CAUGHT APPARENTLY STILL TRYING TO SAVE HER MARRIAGE WITH FURTIVE SEX?

With the red-brown smears on his cheeks and nose, Benny looked like their Noah had. Like father, like son. Like Noah had looked coming home from school.

In all honesty her Benjamin, Benny, he wouldn't rape a fly.

Their next act should be her filing a restraining order against him. Subpoenaing hostile witnesses and the like. The first parents to pull this stunt, they were not. Checking into a shelter for abused women, Mindy should be. They needed to build a narrative, she argued, but Benny put the kibosh on her women's sheltering.

Oh, the injustice that her Noah, her baby boy, should be compelled by cold geography to attend the school he did. An institute of higher learning that boasted a Prison Skillz Track. A verified course of matriculation. A public academy that offered a sex worker track. A prizefighter her Noah was not. No more than his father could act his way out of a paper bag. For the steep taxes they paid, their Noah should go to school to be a punching bag?

A boy of such rich talents? Gifted how he was, this boy was wasted on Ansel Park, when where he wanted to go was Delmar Fields, a magnet school. Japanese immersion they had. So what if Delmar Fields was three districts over?

Who the animals were, Noah wouldn't say. Who'd beaten him bloody, they were juveniles. For any low-life animal boys to see another boy so gifted by fate, these less fortunate would understandably go crazy jealous. Especially seeing how they'd tested too low to be anything in life, and Noah, here's Noah excelling in Computer Lab and seeing a girl Mindy couldn't remember the name of except this girl was an angel from what Noah told people.

Already families like the Brumes paid for schools, plenty. Paid for the free breakfasts and free hot lunches for such animal vermin who'd send a child home with almost a broken nose. At issue was the principle of the thing.

Driving home from the Singers', Mindy had said as much. "Stop by the Arby's," she'd said. "I want you should see the big picture here."

Mister Social Justice. Mister Make-Everything-Right, Benny wanted they should foot the bill for private school. Was he crazy? He was crazy. A family should pay twice over, through property taxes and private tuition, for getting their only son not beaten to a pulp?

Benny she told to butt out. Waiting in the takeout line at Arby's, Mindy said, "Don't take this the wrong way, Benjamin, but you are a weak man. A very weak man and a terrible father." She ordered two beef-and-cheese sandwiches. The melty kind. Telling Benny, "No offense."

If she'd managed to hammer anything into Benny's head, it was the fact that he had serious limitations. That he lacked all imagination was chief among them. Their son walks home from school with his eyes beaten purple as two prune Danish, and his nose like a squashed eggplant, and a chipped tooth, his blood all down the front of his shirt, and all this boy's father can say is, "Noah, we'll look into it."

A reaction like that, no father should feel proud of. No, placid Benny could go to his office. Benny could watch the market and type out his buy and sell orders. Starting with the knife at his throat at the Singers' party and her making accusations of rape, it was Mindy who got the ball rolling. As her boy's only mother she was planning to rescue him from further assailment.

What would it hurt if she saw her own situation improve? Why couldn't Noah's salvation throw a little good fortune her way? In the car, she checked for napkins in the bag of Arby's. Folded on top of the hot sandwiches were paper napkins. "Okay, drive," she told Benny.

She lifted a sandwich from the bag and spread a paper napkin across her Bill Blass. "You only have yourself to blame," she said. She talked while chewing, she was so hungry. "I told you not to wear the Perry Ellis."

It was decided theirs would be a marriage in trial separation. What Winchell always called a *don'tinvitem*. With Mindy renting a cheap studio apartment in the vicinity of Delmar Fields, each day she'd leave the house in Ansel Park, sneaking out early so as not to be seen by Yael Singer. Even if she were seen, would it look so bad to be caught apparently still trying to save her marriage with furtive sex? She'd drive Noah to his new school, then spend her day painting in the apartment. Every afternoon she'd dress up in a uniform from a store that sold uniforms, and leave as if to work the night shift somewhere. She'd eat Arby's melty sandwiches every lunch. Day's end, she'd collect their boy and spend the nights at Ansel Park.

Nights, over the dinner table, Benny would ask, "How's the painting business?"

Noah would be immersed in his Japanese, and she would have a fabled room of her own. That's not to say the Ansel Park house didn't have rooms more than a family of three could use, including the indoor sports court no one ever set foot inside, but a cheap apartment Mindy could move her old college furniture into, her posters and music on compact disc, her paints and easel.

She tried to see the stained grout and splintering cabinet doors the way the future would. The way pilgrims would: as sanctified. Not as shabby, but as a place a revolutionary artist had set out to conquer the world. Mindy Brume's garret. The scuttling brown spot along the baseboard, be it a small mouse or a mammoth cockroach, it only added to her street credibility. Future scholars would marvel over this chipped paint. Lead-based paint. Brain damage waiting to happen. In this neighborhood of fetal alcohol everything.

The edges of asbestos tile peeled up from the cracked concrete floor. To think so many future masterpieces would be painted in the presence of these spiders. That made her think of *Charlotte's Web*. And that, those spiders, made her smell the barbecue from the Arby's down the block.

After a fascinating morning spent applying for social welfare benefits and sketching her fellow applicants, who should she meet but her next-door neighbor. In the parking lot, he was, the neighbor. Crawling out from under a car. He smelled, but like a soft cheese, like one of the very expensive artisan cheeses, like the free-trade ones packaged afloat in sterile urine sealed within a food-grade pig bladder. Like her Unka always said that she couldn't remember, but that translated to "A nose is the best judge of character in buying eels."

The stranger popped a beer and handed it to her.

Mindy took a swig. Looked at the can. "I really shouldn't be drinking."

He asked, "Are you expecting a baby?" No male model, his beer belly stretched the front of his T-shirt. Fat he looked, but in that way that made a grown woman feel more feminine. Where the T-shirt rode up in front, his skin showed. Scars were all it was, that skin. Little red train tracks like from staples, like

from surgery after being gutted by a land mine. Shiny, red train tracks crisscrossing his belly.

Mindy laughed. Took another swig. Shook her head. Beer for lunch. She was already blending in.

Dripping plastic faucets and overloaded aluminum wiring that made every light switch feel warm to the touch. She pictured Georgia O'Keeffe in her adobe hut communing with rattlesnakes. Emily Dickinson in her sooty attic isolation.

"So you're not pregnant?" Her neighbor wasn't convinced.

She raised the can in a toast. She reached across the space between them, took him around the wrist and twisted until she could see his watch. "Not since...," she noted the time, "two hours ago." His wrist felt solid and hairy. She twisted, and he let himself be twisted by scrawny, weak her.

Still, he didn't understand.

"I'm pro-choice, but I didn't get to choose," she stressed. "My old man...." She let her voice trail off.

He looked away as if embarrassed or ashamed on her behalf.

She pressed on, "He didn't want it." She took a long draw on the beer can, then forced a tragic smile for her fake dead baby.

This would become the pattern of her days: She'd leave Ansel Park each morning and drop Noah at his new magnet school. A kiln, they offered. Portuguese immersion. A person could do worse. All that, and Noah had tested as the smartest from his cohort. While he was in school, she'd pretend to live at the apartment. Noah, Mister High and Mighty, he wouldn't show his face at the apartment, he hated the place so much. Chess Club he took after school, and Rocket Club, to help his college applications but actually to avoid the spiders and her painting him. The rent she paid didn't compare to the tuition they saved by fake-living in the district. Being fake-trial separated. Headed for fake-divorce due to faked domestic abuse.

Mindy was trying on a new her. This neighbor was the mirror she watched herself reflected in. She saw the way he must see her. With her French manicure and waxed legs. Vassar written all over her. She cleared her throat. "This isn't my real voice."

Maybe he'd buy that she was a sex worker. Daytime she'd be at the apartment, winding down. Nighttimes she implied she spent screwing some monied power broker or a captain of industry. This lie would make the imperfect lie about being a waitress perfect.

Everyone living in the complex, they were a refugee from something. Somewhere.

His listening was a pit she kept falling into. Or it was a hole she wanted to fill with her words. She told him she'd contracted gonorrhea in her mouth one time and had let it go too long, and after that she had this voice, different than before, deeper on account of her vocal cords being scarred. It was a test. She was shit-testing him. The stranger never looked away or flinched. Because he was unfazed or because of the language barrier, she wasn't certain.

Gonorrhea wasn't likely the first word they taught in ESL so talking to him felt nice, relaxed, like talking to a nice dog, like a retired pit bull, you could fantasize having reckless afternoon sex with. The exact words didn't matter.

She looked at his scarred gut. Looked long enough to let him see that she was looking. Someone had tortured this man cruelly and Mindy kept waiting for that cruelty to surface in him.

She remembered Gauguin's bare-breasted Tahitian women. Toulouse-Lautrec's ghastly parlor-house whores. All the women turned into art by men and then forgotten. All the men made famous by discarded women.

Under the sun his pale face had darkened and his dark hair had lightened until they were the same red-brown. A detail maybe no one except a true artist would note. All of those forgotten women she would avenge. He would be her muse. Like a *Bridges of Madison County*–type situation only with her as the savvy artist and him as the dim-witted foreigner. That seemed like progress as these things went. Trust her, he didn't, not to date. She needed his trust.

That evening in the car, driving home with Noah, she asked, "Those boys who hit you? How did they hit you?" She added, "I mean, with sticks or what?"

Noah sighed. The only way to describe such a sigh was as a confessional sigh. As if the jig was up. "You remember Natasha?" he asked.

Mindy didn't.

"She was sort of with me," he said.

The angel he meant.

"She transferred to Delmar." Not to mince words, but their Noah had beat himself to his own pulp. That's the genius they'd raised.

From behind, somebody honked. Mindy hadn't realized she'd slowed to a crawl. To let everyone pass she pulled to the curb. "You did a very good job." Nurturing she tried to sound, that's instead of shocked. Then as if just curious, she asked, "How'd you do it?"

Noah's method had been to stand in their indoor sports court and throw a basketball against the concrete wall, close his eyes and step into its return path. A mouth guard, he wore, like from boxing. God bless him. For smaller bruises he'd catch a racquetball in the face.

When Benny got home and found Mindy with both eyes blackened and a swelling on her forehead so tight it looked to split the skin, that and a fat lip, with racquetball bruises on her neck and collarbones, she assured him it was just to keep up appearances. To placate him she brought up how much she'd be getting in food stamps and rent assistance. The government was practically paying them to send Noah to a better school.

On Ivan, the bruises did the trick. His name was Ivan, her neighbor. He accepted her life as a prostitute brimming with diseases and still kissed her hurt mouth. He seemed to appreciate that she wasn't starved to prison-camp thinness. Not like that Myra from yoga everyone said was so perfect. Ivan would lay claim to big handfuls of her and marvel over her skin. Beautiful she was, merely by not being scarred by barbed wire and dog bites. His smell she got acclimated to, and he wore a fresh condom every time without her having to ask which put him a notch above Benny on the gentleman scale.

Such a man she'd never met. Ivan wept

SHE REMEMBERED THE WOMEN TURNED INTO MEN MADE FAMOUS BY DISCARDED WOMEN.

over her bruises. Kissed them, he did and swore to end the life of the whoremonger who beat her so savagely. A *Fifty Shades of Grey* situation it was, except she had to beat herself. This too seemed like progress as gender relations went.

Noah on the contrary, her genius, shaped up to be her problem child. Driving back to the house one night he announced that his angel, his Natasha, her parents had relocated to Burien. Such a gifted, talented boy he was, Noah wanted to transfer back to Ansel Park. Forget the kiln and Japanese immersion. This, after Ivan had bought her a car, a Ford, so a prostitute riding the bus she'd stop having to be. Such a romantic, that Ivan. Driving her clunker Ford back to Ansel Park, she asked Noah, "You want I should tell your father you beat yourself?"

It sounded dirty, but he knew what she meant.

What she didn't say was how proud she felt. Her Noah hadn't inherited his father's talent for lousy acting. Benny with his always-smiling, Benny couldn't hold a candle to Ivan in the sack. But as her Unka was fond of saying, not that she could remember, but in English it came out as, "No good eel doesn't get stale."

Not that she told Noah, but she was glad to be fake-reconciling from her fake-separation for fake-spousal abuse. She'd only ever told Ivan her name was Liana. Her crap from college, the Ford he'd bought, she could walk away from. Simply leave the keys on the apartment counter and pull the door shut, locked behind her. Ivan wouldn't have a clue where to look.

Their last afternoon in the sack, Mindy looked around at the mildew. Her way to say good-bye was by giving Ivan an Arby's sandwich they could share in a bed she'd never have to make. Dirty sheets she would leave behind. Disappear she would, step into her Jil Sander slacks and catch the bus to her fake sex workplace. She'd told Ivan the Ford was idling rough, dying at stoplights, so he'd hauled out his toolbox to make repairs. Not the truth, Mindy's story, but reason enough to abandon the car. Give it a week, two weeks, and the landlord would show Ivan the unit with her uniforms hanging in the closet, her dirty Arby's bag on the counter while she'd be vanished Amelia Earhart–style.

Right during sex someone came *honk-honk*ing, some car, into the parking lot.

From the window she looked to see Benny pull in. Benjamin, who'd collected Noah from his last day at Delmar Fields. Happy smiling like a dog he was. Like a golden something dog, he stepped out of his car and called up to her window, "So this is where you live? What a dump!"

Before she could answer, Ivan happened. Tell Benny to run, she wanted to, but Ivan burst out of the apartment door wearing only boxer shorts and his scars. Ivan snatched up something from his open toolbox beside the fake-broken-down Ford. The whatever tool it was, Ivan ran up and backhanded Benny with it. Swatted Benny across the face. One of those knives it was, like from cutting carpets with a sliding-out razor blade. Mindy could see because Ivan flung the knife away and disappeared sprinting down the street.

Benny, that Benny, he had her going. He truly did, the way he put both hands over his throat and hot Chinese mustard from Williams-Sonoma came gushing out between his fingers. But gallons it was, pouring out. Red-brown mustard that must cost a fortune, it was so much, especially for Benny who'd obviously spared no expense to teach her a lesson. Of course he'd hired this Ivan person, who most likely was mowing someone's lawn in Ansel Park and who wouldn't say no, not if it meant getting paid to screw Mindy and get Benny's revenge for the brisket at the Singers' party. As if this time his throat was really cut, except it looked so fake.

Benny was that kind of petty, he was. All this pettiness just to prove he could act.

From the window Mindy watched her husband sink to his knees. His eyes, he was making the same slaughterhouse eyes he'd made with the brisket knife. Whatever secret apparatus he'd rigged it was pumping tons, yes tons of expensive Chinese mustard into the gravel, and he pretended to topple forward. Fake-gasping with Chinese mustard gurgling from both corners of his wide-open mouth. Pretend twitching, facedown in the gravel, he was, while from the apartment window Mindy filmed with her camera phone and shouted, "Bravo, Benjamin Brume!" And, "You're not fooling anyone, mister!"

And like maybe they took acting lessons together, but their Noah jumped out of the car in slow motion and fell, skidded and fell in his hurry, crawling across sharp gravel on his hands and knees he did. Noah crawled to his father to fake a tourniquet around his father's neck using only his bare hands, shouting, "Dad! Don't die, Dad!" even as they're both hamming it up in a flood of Chinese mustard.

Yael Singer, Mindy half expected to jump out from behind a tree, this looked so phony. The Goldblatts and the Futters and that Myra, all watching to see Mindy get what's coming to her. With sirens, yes ambulance sirens even her Benny had paid to come screaming closer and closer for added realism. Benny who'd thought of everything, such a stage manager he was. Her Benjamin, whom she'd married and given a son, and who rewarded her by fake-going limp in the arms of their Noah in the dirty parking lot all because of her ruining his favorite Perry Ellis.

A little embarrassed Mindy felt now about how loose she'd got, how soft and loose she'd got so fast with this hired Ivan. That shill, Ivan, she'd wanted him so bad. Well, the joke was on her. *Hah-ha!* And like something else she couldn't remember, it came to mind. More immigrant wisdom, but when her Unka said it, the words came out "To a liar the whole world looks like a lie."

Well the joke, the final punch line would be Benjamin Brume, double hah-ha, because he'd never know to laugh. And such a joke! Her monthly period Mindy hadn't had in six weeks. It could be more, maybe, but play-acting Benny, her playing-dead husband would be raising the child of his hired Ivan.

The scope of his routine, not to mention the expense, all to humiliate her, Mindy Brume. She stood in the apartment window looking down, she did, then put aside filming and started to clap her hands. But very slowly. ■

ART BY MEN AND THEN FORGOTTEN. THE ALL OF THOSE WOMEN SHE WOULD AVENGE.

for

VENDELA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY

JOSH RYAN

We're kicking off the year with an extraordinary January Playmate: ***Vendela*** *will challenge, charm and inspire you, if you have the guts to get in the ring*

People often paint a picture of me way before they even meet me. They think that I am a certain way because of my shaved head and tough look. In reality, I'm extremely shy. A friend once said, "You look like a badass, but deep inside you are as soft as baby shit." Still, I am able to tap into a certain confidence in front of the camera—a safe zone where I can access my alter ego. I get to switch between this tough character, when I'm on set, and the real-life version of me. I guess that's why people get so confused.

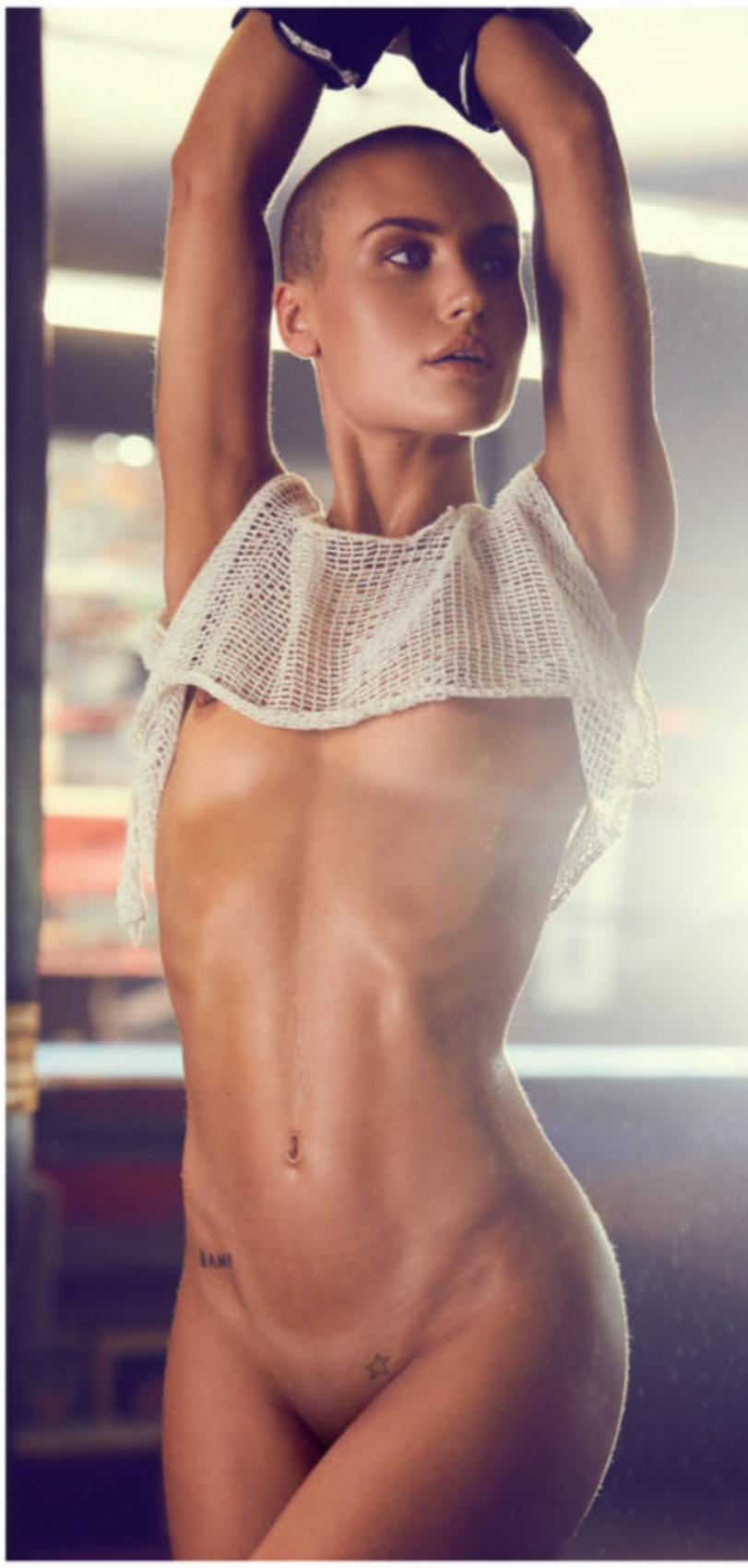
As much as I'm not what people expect, I always try to be up-front with who I am. I'm very blunt and sarcastic. Also, everything I do is all or nothing. This is why I sometimes struggle with social media. I try really hard to make people laugh and feel good about themselves. I don't want people to go through my Instagram and leave it feeling worse. I try to keep it as real as possible without publicly ranting when I'm having a bad day or putting my private life out there and disrespecting the people around me.

I try to be someone people can relate to. That's why I've been very open about my experience getting out of an abusive relationship a few years ago, all while having issues with alcohol and eventually getting sober. I know these are things that many people struggle with but may not be comfortable discussing. I want to show people that they don't have to be strong all the time and that it's okay to have flaws because we all have them.

My goal is to be a strong role model. I love lending support to other women—helping them be confident with who they are and the skin they're in. We often beat ourselves up about things we can't control. People have been telling me my whole life that I can't be a model because I'm only five-foot-five, and I still struggle with that. I grew up in Sweden, where you're supposed to go to school, get a degree, get a good nine-to-five job, get married, have kids and buy a house—and that's it. My dream has always been so much bigger than that, but I had to fight my way out of my comfort zone to get to where I am today. I came to the U.S. around two years ago, with a thousand bucks in my bank account, to go to school. Since then I've achieved so much more than I could've ever imagined.

It's important to take risks in order to get where you want to be in life. Don't ever settle. ■

Relax, take it off



CHAMPION

DATA SHEET

BIRTHPLACE: Stockholm, Sweden **CURRENT CITY:** Los Angeles, California

ON BIG BREAKS

I booked one of my first big jobs when I got a call from an agency I didn't even know I was signed to. They were like, "Are you still bald? We've got a job for you." It was to be the first female face of the video game *Battlefield 1*. A lot of people supported it, but a lot of others hated that they put a girl on the cover.

ON POSING NUDE

It's so empowering. We should be proud of our bodies. We all have the right to be naked and embrace the body as art. But with nude shoots, I have to be really comfortable. I won't shoot something passive; I'll only shoot something that makes me feel powerful.

ON INDULGENCE

The wallpaper on my phone is a picture of garlic bread. I just love food, especially crème brûlée, cheesecake and ice cream.

ON MEN

I like darker, athletic guys. I work out a lot and take care of my body, so I expect guys to do the same. It doesn't mean he has to be super shredded, but I want to feel safe with my guy. I also need a guy who can be sarcastic back to me, you know? I'm a sarcastic asshole most of the time, so I need someone who can deal with it.

ON ATTRACTION

I love a man bun. I really love long-haired guys. I don't know why. I don't like beards, but I like a man bun! Maybe it's the juxtaposition of a guy wearing his long hair tied up in a bun with my shaved head.

ON BOXING

My trainer and I laugh so hard every session. I love boxing, but I'm so uncoordinated. He'll show me a combination, down to every distinct punch, and my reaction is just "Huh?" Every single time.

ON TOUGH LOVE

I'm very straightforward. I say exactly what I think, and some people get butt-hurt. I love very deeply. I would do anything for the people closest to me. If I cut you out, I have a really good reason. But it takes a lot for me to get there. I love hard, and I give tough love.

ON INSTINCT

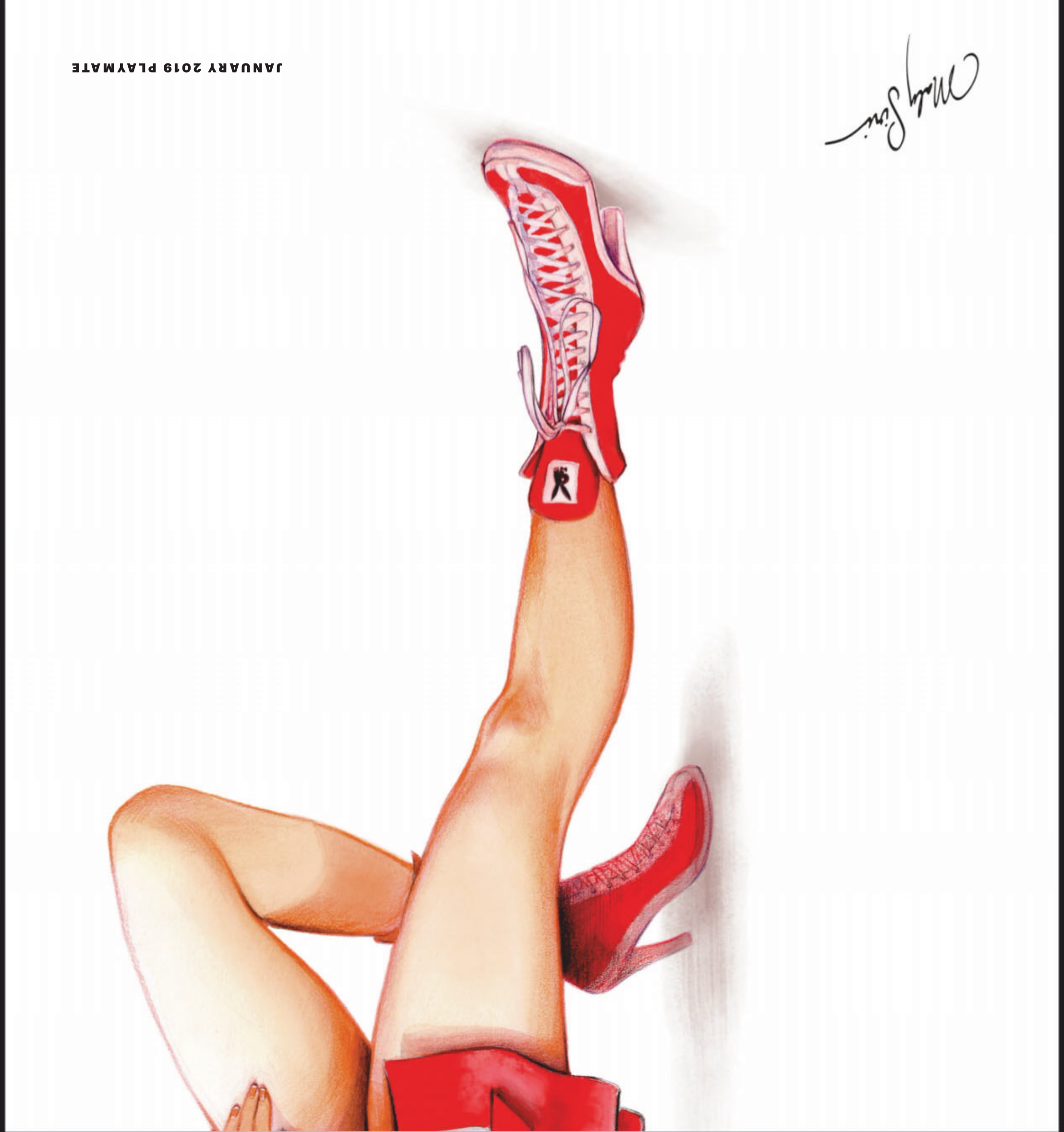
In relationships, in friendships, in the workplace, if you're not comfortable doing something, always trust your gut feeling. Don't ever do something you really don't want to do.

ON BRAVERY

I'm working on taking more risks in my work. PLAYBOY is one of those risks that was out of my comfort zone and ended up being a great choice. I don't want to be too scared. I don't want to grow up and get old and be like, What if I had done that?

JANUARY 2019 PLAYMATE

JANUARY 2019 PLAYMATE



In America, punk has become a safe and predictable rite of passage; in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, it's a matter of life and death

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
DANIEL C. BRITT

Peace Through PUNK ROCK

Min Sid, singer of Yangon punk band Outcast, has a smoke at Shwedagon Pagoda.

M

Min Sid's upper lip curls and his tattooed hands twitch at the wrist. Slight spasms grab at the 22-year-old punk rocker's cheek as he examines the sharp silhouettes in front of him. Onstage at the Caribbean-themed Pirate Bar in downtown Yangon, he's a living metaphor for his country, Myanmar—its modern skin and its bone-deep agony.

He wrote songs in 2017 while weaning himself off heroin with street methadone and amphetamines. Tremors still run like falling dominoes up his arms and into his face, a steady hum below Min Sid's smile as he watches 50 punks, all dyed Mohawks and fishnet T-shirts, fall over one another. Everyone is sloppy-friendly drunk, and everyone in the room loves Min Sid, the Yangon punk scene's rising star. Everyone is his brother—his "bruzaaah!" Still, he can't help but wonder if the police will cut the power to the show, as they have in the past, or how many of the taxi drivers hopping out of their cabs to eyeball the crowd are paid police informants.

For these 20-somethings dousing one another in beer, this is a gathering of chosen family. The Yangon punk scene breaks down into three waves stretching back to the mid-1990s, and luminaries from all three are in attendance. Shway (not his real name), the reclusive founding father of Yangon punk, with hair too thin to be teased into a Mohawk, perches on a bar stool with his video camera. He brought the first punk CDs—bootlegged compilations of songs by New York band the Casualties—into the Yangon open-air markets in 1996. Kyaw Thu Win, a.k.a. Kyaw Kyaw, is credited with founding the scene's more worldly and web-savvy second wave. His band, Rebel Riot, has been covered extensively by European journalists and young documentary filmmakers ever since. Tonight he's master of ceremonies, popping in and out of the spotlight, hyping the younger musicians and rallying the crowd with chants: "Fuck discrimination! Fuck the war!"

At punk shows from Oakland, California to Ridgewood, New York, cries like these are obligatory, implied or mocked, and the studded jackets are Halloween costumes—relics of a scene supplanted by myriad subgenres. In Myanmar, where decades of discrimination have tumbled into genocide and the civil war has been nursed by successive junta leaders to span the past seven decades, "fuck the war" means fuck the norm. It means fuck the one thing all 135 ethnicities in Myanmar have in common—life dangerously close to blood-speckled grass and villages set ablaze by government soldiers.

Opposite: *A Yangon punker mounts a charm offensive.* ***Above, clockwise from top left:*** *Min Sid strikes a biblical pose outside Shwedagon Pagoda; punks take a break from Pirate Bar's beer-soaked mayhem; Kyaw Kyaw displays a print from the photo shoot that resulted in personal threats and his written promise that he'd leave the Buddha out of future Rebel Riot endeavors.*

Ten or 20 foreign aid workers pepper the floor, swaying above the native crowd like pale palms in thick tennis shoes. (Most nights, Pirate Bar is where this group seeks new faces in the humanitarian dating pool.) Like every other damp, green-lit gin mill and beer station in Yangon, Pirate Bar tends to observe an unspoken ban on political discussions, with a special sensitivity to opinions about the Rohingya exodus from Myanmar's Rakhine state. So it's an unlikely place for an ideological cri de coeur, but on this April night, the world churning around the pencil-thin punk musicians of Myanmar's largest city has made it one. Since Shway's first efforts, a line has been drawn between Yangon punks and the rest of their conservative homeland. When Min Sid and his band, Outcast, take the stage, they're entering their country's culture war, a shouting match between the Buddhist majority, more than 35 million strong, and a small community of derelict punk rockers, starving artists and university students.

Both sides have their heels dug in, jockeying for the philosophical heart of a military state only recently reopened to the West with the free election of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2015. The three-front civil war the government has waged against minority populations for the past 70 years has been decried in only a few places in Myanmar; Pirate Bar is one of them. Cops generally tolerate the punks, but the bar is only a mile from the notoriously corrupt Kyauktada police station, so all bets are off. In January 2018, Kyauktada station cops forced poet and Muslim civil rights activist Than Toe Aung into the back of a van. They beat him there and at the station before his family paid a bribe for his release.

Suddenly power chords pummel the thick air, ascending in pitch and volume; in his mind, Min Sid begins to levitate. Music is like heroin in that way, he says later: It makes him feel like he's floating. He turns his back to the crowd and focuses on the scrawny musicians onstage with him.

He screams into the mike, "Break *boundaraaaay!*"

He's floating above the boundaries he grew up with—a nationalist education, a traditional Burmese society based on conformity and a marathon of military assaults that formed a circle of death around Yangon.

He aims his addled truth at the ceiling: "Cunt *authoritaaaay!*"

A few blocks beyond Min Sid's voice, in the Yaw Min Gyi neighborhood, Buddhist devotees young and old lay down long red carpets on closed-off streets. It's only a few weeks before the April New Year's celebration, and plush outdoor meditation rugs line large portions of the city. Rocking back and forth

with their eyes closed, somewhere between wakefulness and sleep, monks lead the crowd droning mantras for hours into the hot night.

• • •

Burma, the former British colony and Japanese puppet state, rejected its colonial name in 1989 in exchange for Myanmar, a move meant to acknowledge not just the ethnic Burmese majority but all the ethnicities within its borders. That may have been the government's last move toward inclusivity. Its attacks on the Rohingya, Kachin, Shan and Karen people in 2017 and 2018 make Myanmar's overarching domestic policy look like a race to violently displace minorities—for mineral resources in the case of the Kachin, for poppy farmland in the case of the Shan and Karen, and for fear of a religious and cultural takeover in the case of the Rohingya Muslims.

The Myanmar government of the 1990s was as opaque and as opposed to freedom of expression as it is today. Large expanses of the countryside were closed to journalists and the public, as they are now. Locals say much of that land was grabbed by the military and privately mined for jade or divided into government contract farms. Those who got too close to exposing the illegal economies in those regions were jailed or disappeared altogether, according to Kyaw Kyaw. "There is danger for people who make noise—still today," he says.

The journalist Soe Moe Tun, reporting on illegal logging in the Sagaing region, was beaten to death in late 2016. The same year, two reporters' homes were threatened with bombs in the Rakhine and Kachin states. In another case, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, two Reuters reporters who uncovered a mass grave and verified the summary execution of 10 Rohingya men by government soldiers and Buddhist villagers in Rakhine state in the fall of 2017, have been sentenced to seven-year prison sentences for violating the Official Secrets Act. A vague and antiquated piece of colonial legislation, the OSA was enacted by the British Governorate in 1923 to classify evidence of corruption as an official state secret, allowing colonials to jail Burmese insurgents.

Myanmar's openness to Western business can be seen in the expat boat parties in the port of Yangon and the slick bars and English-language classrooms popping up all over the city. Distrust of the Western media and international standards of free speech, which flowed in with the American and European money, is just as plain.

"Fake news from America!" is a frequent café reaction to *New York Times* stories that treat Myanmar government militarism as acts of war instead of self-defense or antiterrorism measures. Inquisitive foreigners are likely to be told they have no right to speak about Myanmar, but the reality of this young democracy is that natives are also limited in their right to talk about their country. Laws governing protest, telecommunications and defamation, many left over from British colonial rule, are still used by the government to jail critics.

"BUDDHA DIDN'T NEED ANYBODY ELSE. HE WENT HIS OWN WAY, LIKE JOHNNY CASH."

Human Rights Watch reports that by the beginning of 2016, 166 people were awaiting trial for breaking the Peaceful Assembly Law, including students who'd protested against the role of the military in government, farmers who'd protested the confiscation of their land for government gem mines and journalists who'd protested the arrest of other journalists. The legislation's vague language penalizes "statements likely to cause fear and alarm" and those who "disturb the public tranquility."

To make matters worse, political activism in Myanmar fell into complacency after once lauded humanitarian Aung San Suu Kyi took office as state counselor in 2016.

"Their reasoning was that Aung San Suu Kyi was elected democratically. It's what the people wanted, so what is there left to protest?" says Zin Linn, a Yangon-based musician and activist on the fringes of the punk scene.

Since Aung San Suu Kyi's election, the Tatmadaw, the military arm of the Myanmar government, has maintained considerable operations countrywide. In August, the United Nations called for Myanmar's military leaders to be tried in the International Criminal Court in The Hague for war crimes committed during the 2017 crackdown on the Rohingya. By September China had announced its opposition to "internationalizing" issues surrounding the Rohingya crisis, effectively saying it would vote against extraditing Myanmar's military leaders for a trial.

Aung San Suu Kyi has proven reluctant to denounce the government's scorched-earth campaign in the Rakhine state; as a result, she's been stripped of human rights prizes including the Elie Wiesel Award from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Freedom of Oxford award and the Freedom of the City of Dublin award.

"She's the same as all the others," Zin Linn says. "It doesn't matter how they get power."

The Pirate Bar stage feels like the only place in Yangon where popular opinion doesn't fall blindly in step with the government's propaganda newspapers. Endless Western media reports that Rohingya Muslims continue to flee government-sanctioned violence in Rakhine, along with news of a spike in military assaults in Kachin, have created a sense that Yangon is an alternate universe. Silent while war is all around. Silent except for this beer-soaked bastion of free expression.

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Kyaw Kyaw says that Shway passed down his primary tenet of punk in 2004: "Solidarity," he said, "is number one."

Those words have echoed between Kyaw Kyaw's shaved temples for the past 14 years. In that time he has become the charismatic, English-speaking face of the Yangon punk scene. He and Rebel Riot are the focus of the documentary *My Buddha Is Punk,* released last January on Vimeo on Demand. Another rumored project, a crowd-funded narrative film about a female filmmaker from Europe marginalized because of her fetish for Asian males, began production in the summer of 2017; Kyaw Kyaw plays the pierced love interest.

But visibility alone doesn't pay the bills, so Kyaw Kyaw converted his apartment, perched in a walk-up in the Hledan district, into a screen-printing shop. (The Rebel Riot shop sign being difficult to see from the street, it's much easier to follow the sound of Bob Marley, Cannibal Corpse and Pantera upward to the third-floor balcony.) The sale of Rebel Riot shirts pays for rent and food for the transient musicians between gigs. More important, the shop is where everyone meets. When I walk in, a metal guitarist and a Vice journalist visiting from Hamburg are smoking and talking about politics and the punk scene in Germany. Punks from the countryside wander into the shop for drunken

The pit at Pirate Bar last April, on the night of the Outcast show.

jam sessions and family-style meals. Outcast drummer Japan Gyi celebrated his 22nd birthday there over a meal of Myanmar Beer, dried crickets and sautéed chicken heads.

Kyaw Kyaw appears to have taken Shway's philosophy of solidarity to heart while dodging corrupt police and protesting the conflicts that encircle Yangon. Focusing on the idea that political change in Myanmar must be generational, for the past three years he has been on a mission to expose schoolchildren in rural villages to punk (not to mention pop) music, the arts and the international media before they get hooked on government-controlled television news. Through crowdfunding, Rebel Riot has toured Thailand, Indonesia and much of Eastern Europe, building a roster of promoters and paving the way for Outcast and other third-wave bands.

Solidarity was number one with Shway because he knew the punk community would suffocate without it. They are a generation on the margins of a traditional Buddhist society that often sees artists as people too stupid or weak to pursue careers in business. Their country is by turns maniacally pacifist and militaristic, a new democracy and an old colony. Individual rights are determined by the ethnicity listed on a person's national identification card. A tightly knit punk community—and vocal opposition to the government war machine—could grow if musicians and fans had one another's tattooed backs, if they lived as though punk were their listed ethnicity.

Meanwhile, Kyaw Kyaw and his band are at constant risk. Threats rolled in over Facebook after Kyaw Kyaw posed as a punk-rock version of Buddha while other members of Rebel Riot dressed as Jesus and the Hindu goddess Shiva for a photo shoot in Thailand. When the threats intensified and found their way to Kyaw Kyaw's cell phone, he signed an agreement with a Yangon governing body stating that he would never again punkify the Buddha. But that didn't stop him from writing a song called "Fuck Religious Rules":

Fuck religious rules
There are no human rights by religious rules
There is genocide by religious wars
Religious rules fuck off!

• • •

Religious conservatism isn't the only thing threatening to snuff out the Yangon punk scene. Min Sid began his path to punk rock enlightenment—and his descent into addiction—in the blackest, moldiest concrete tenement on Lan Thit Yeit Thar, a street on the west side of the city. Here, scraps of thick, construction-grade bamboo, browned palm fronds and the silhouettes of passed-out drunks decorate the sidewalk. When it rains, cigarette butts roll into the awnings and tumble down, floor by floor, into black puddles on the sidewalk. The older buildings, with their porous concrete under-muscle exposed, grow another layer of mold, wide black patches that fade out like reverb.

In the stairwell leading up to his home, in the shadows cast by the rebar security door, Min Sid shot heroin into his arm for the first time. As a teen, he was getting paid to turn his sketches of animals into tattoos. Sometimes kids in the neighborhood paid in cash; sometimes they paid in drugs. Min Sid quickly learned his place in the world's second-largest opioid-producing drug economy (Afghanistan being number one). Opioids and amphetamines produced in Kachin state and in the Wa region of the Shan state make their way to Yangon, according to Min Sid, and beyond the borders to Bangladesh via a network of corrupt statesmen, tribal leaders and police. Use of the product as currency is a testament to its popularity and its casual tether to daily life. Workers who produce heroin and other drugs, and those who distribute them, are often paid in kind and encouraged to use or sell, Min Sid says.

According to Nang Pann Ei Kham of the Drug Policy Advocacy group in Myanmar, there were 83,000 injection-drug users in the country in 2016. In 2017, Myanmar journalists reported that authorities had seized 4.6 million methamphetamine pills in February in Rakhine's Maungdaw township, near the border of Bangladesh, and 400,000 additional pills that May. The same year, $220 million in opiates and amphetamines were seized and burned by the government for show. The Associated Press took a video.

Two of Min Sid's close friends died heroin-related deaths. His addicted cousin disappeared into the countryside and has been missing for the past three years. Min Sid didn't feel right screaming "cunt authority" while he was lining the authorities' pockets, even as a small-time addict. On top of tragedy and hypocrisy, there were the relentless beatings—though not ones delivered by gangs or other druggies over money or territory. Min Sid's traditional Burmese mother whupped him silly every time she saw him high, including the time she and his father carried him to the hospital, shitting his pants and choking on his own vomit.

"It was hard on my family, so my mom was hard on me," he says, his hand instinctively moving upward to cover the back of his head.

• • •

A few days after the Pirate Bar show, Min Sid and I are walking around diamond-topped Shwedagon Pagoda, his country's most sacred temple. Somehow he's the one who looks like a foreigner—a guy in black sneaking off to smoke cigs, a huge breach of pagoda etiquette, while everyone else is lighting incense, praying and washing the Buddha statues for luck.

"These people forget that Buddha didn't

need anybody else," Min Sid says. "He went his own way, like Johnny Cash."

Many of the families here most likely don't believe that more than half a million people have been forcibly uprooted from the northwestern part of their country, or that the military crackdown on the Rohingya has been called genocide by the UN. The state newspapers, *The Mirror Daily* and *The Global New Light of Myanmar,* don't run photos of the burning Muslim houses in Rakhine's Maungdaw township.

"We trust our government to handle terrorists," one man says between prayers.

Last April, a young Rohingya citizen journalist was my eye inside Maungdaw. He described a black skyline outside his window, caused, he said, by around-the-clock house fires. They stopped burning only if a European dignitary was coming into the Rakhine state, he said. After his third dictated report, the journalist fled to Bangladesh.

That same month, Thingyan, the annual water festival, began under a clear blue sky in Yangon. It was four days of fire hoses soaking the crowds at outdoor concerts. Drunken water fights between cars on gridlocked streets welcomed Myanmar's New Year. Having left Bangladesh a month earlier, I knew that right across the Naf River at Tulabagan, the newest Rohingya refugee encampment, Rohingya families had their jerricans lined up around one dry well, waiting for rain.

Within the Yangon state-media twilight zone, many locals believe the official narrative that the Rohingya have killed one another, set their own houses on fire and displaced themselves en masse in order to gain sympathy from the Western media. Others say the government assault on Rohingya families is a well-deserved retaliation: In August 2017, a group of Rohingya extremists attacked 30 police stations in Rakhine, killing at least a dozen policemen. According to Matthew Wells, a senior crisis advisor with Amnesty International, that same month, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, a Rohingya Muslim extremist group, executed nearly 100 Hindu men, women and children.

The punks look at the military crony government, organized Buddhism and the government education they received with a skepticism that's hard to find elsewhere in Yangon. They're unafraid to scream their doubts onstage or to have sympathy for those ignored by the majority of ethnic Burmese. The punks may be hazy on the nuances of the current Myanmar conflicts, but based on their childhoods spent within an aging propaganda machine, they suspect the state narrative isn't the full story. A lot of what they've learned in Myanmar just doesn't jibe with the rest of the world, suggests Kyaw Kyaw.

"For example, in Myanmar Hitler is a national hero," he says.

Japanese generals founded the Tatmadaw during World War II, and government education in Myanmar still delivers an Axis version of history. According to a local, world history textbooks for grades eight and 10 make no mention of the Holocaust. Descriptions of Nazism and fascism don't go far beyond "strong" and "unifying." When I approach a university student for a quick man-on-the-street interview, he describes Hitler as a "determined artist who, with hard work, made himself into a world leader." Pop your head into a café and you'll likely glimpse a few Hitler screen savers. If you share a ride with a traveler from Germany, odds are a Yangon taxi driver will give a thumbs-up and say, "Germany good! Hitler good!"

The silence in Yangon crackles. After New Year, an uptick in clashes between the government and Kachin state insurgents displaced 6,000 people. Starving families caught in the crossfire near Hpakant spent the summer hiding in the bush, living on banana stems. Reports from aid agencies in the region read like screams from a distant point in the sea, though Google shows Hpakant to be around a day's drive away.

The illusion of Myanmar is as convincing as the ragged sparrow handlers who sit on the curb with their caged birds. For a few kyats, a handler will release a bird into the air, freighted with tourist wishes. But they don't release the birds for long; the cage is their home. The sparrows will return for seeds, to be released and caged again for more money.

"Many things in Myanmar are like this," Kyaw Kyaw says. "It's hard for foreigners to see my people. When we are happy we smile at you. When we are angry we also smile."

At Shwedagon Pagoda, Min Sid and I sing "I've Been Everywhere" and "Folsom Prison Blues" while mantras fill the air around us. It isn't the first time the Man in Black has come up: After the Pirate Bar show, Min Sid stayed drunk for two days, visiting punk-rocker friends and playing music. At one point the punks got into a fistfight with some locals from a village on the outskirts of Yangon—"redneck Burmese," he called them. When the police asked for the punks' names, Min Sid slackened his jaw and in a comically deep voice said, "I'm Johnny Cash, and this is Tennessee Two."

Here at the pagoda, every voice connects to the next. The hum bouncing off the ancient inlaid walls and countless ivory statues of the Buddha brings out the vestigial drug tremor in Min Sid's cheek. In that moment, in his weary, tattoo-fringed face, I see what Kyaw Kyaw was talking about: angry, smiling. ■

A traffic jam, Yangon-style, with Shwedagon Pagoda looming over it all.

"I'd feel more comfortable if my safe word was at least eight characters long with one number and an uppercase letter."

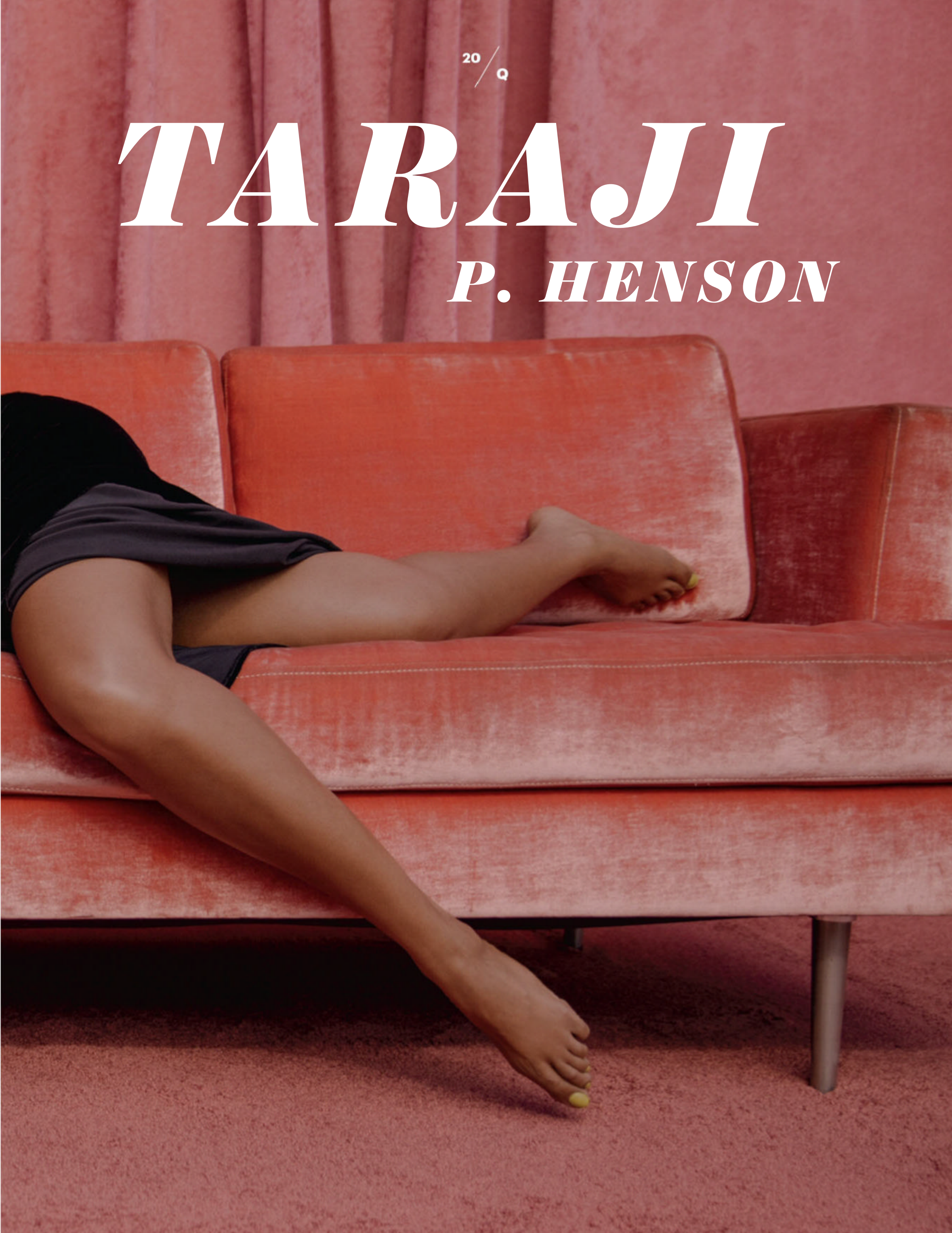
The powerhouse actress and star of *What Men Want* (who has gone by the name Cookie both on *Empire* and IRL) is a walking master class on surviving and thriving no matter what

BY **ERIC SPITZNAGEL**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MICAIAH CARTER**

20/Q

TARAJI P. HENSON



ONCE YOU START TALKING, YOU REALIZE THAT MEN AND WOMEN WANT THE SAME GODDAMN THINGS.

Q1: *In What Men Want, you play a woman who is able to hear what men are thinking. Do you actually want to know what men are thinking?*

HENSON: I don't want that. I have too much shit rattling around in my head already. We shouldn't need that anyway. If men were just honest and put their shit on the table, we wouldn't need no voodoo. We need more communication. Once you start talking, you realize that men and women want the same goddamn things: They want someone they can trust with their heart, they want protection, they want security. That's what we all want as humans. It's not deep.

Q2: *The movie's premise is that men think they know everything about women, but we actually have no idea. So what do guys not know about women that we should?*

HENSON: Women get emotional or upset when we're pushed. It doesn't come out of nowhere; it's provoked. Just because I'm emotional doesn't make me crazy. Men have to own their part in that. You have to listen, listen, listen to your woman. It goes both ways: When my man drives me up the wall, I try to think about what happened and what I did to add to it. You've got to be a grown-up to be in a relationship. It can't be "I love you as long as you're doing right by me." Love is "I love you even when you fall. I love you even when I hate your ass. You piss me off, but I made dinner for your stank ass anyway 'cause I love you."

Q3: *You're getting married this summer to former NFL player Kelvin Hayden. Are you ready?*

HENSON: I'm still learning how to be ready. Every day I'm learning how to be better in a relationship. I just found out, in our therapy sessions, that men have fewer words than women. I didn't know that. They run out of words. Because women are emotional, we want to talk through everything. Of course we have more words; we're the communicators. Kelvin, he thinks he's a comedian. Anytime we're in a disagreement or I'm like, "We need to talk about this," he'll look at me and say, "Baby, I done ran out of words." He's joking, but I'm starting to accept that it's true.

Q4: *Speaking of listening to each other, your next film, out in April, is The Best of Enemies, in which you play civil rights activist Ann Atwater, who forms an unlikely friendship with Klan leader C.P. Ellis. Did making this movie make you want to leave your bubble?*

HENSON: I do it through my art. That's why this movie is so important. Me talking to one person is not going to be as effective as the movie, because it takes a big old mirror and says, "Hey, America, look at yourself." Although Atwater was on the right side of history, she had the same intolerance as that man. They were both radical in their beliefs. They had to sit across from each other, look each other in the eye to really see themselves. We all need to get to that point with each other. We need to look at the people we disagree with and say, "You ain't better than me. We're the same person."

Q5: *Atwater couldn't be more physically different from you. What was the biggest challenge in that transformation?*

HENSON: I knew I had to be padded. When I came in for my fitting, the suit they gave me had these perky little tits. I was like, "Um, I don't know if this is gonna work." Physicality is very important to me, especially when I'm taking on somebody who's real. I needed *big* breasts, the kind that change the way you walk and that you have to think about when you sit. I mean, the boobs on this suit, they were like *my* boobs. I was like, "Can you all please call Tyler Perry and ask him what Madea got in her boobs?" All the pictures I've seen of Atwater, this woman looked like she ate pork chops, ribs, corn bread, smothered chicken, fatback, neck bones. When she sat down for a meal, those titties got to rest on the table.

Q6: *This is our Freedom of Speech issue. Is there anyone in the world right now you wish would just shut the hell up?*

HENSON: You know who I wish would shut the hell up. He wears a wig and does way too much tanning. [*laughs*] Just be quiet, just *shhh,* take a nap. Just put his finger in a muzzle so he won't tweet anymore. Do they have finger muzzles? [*both our phones start blaring*] Holy crap, is that the president? Oh my God! [*checks phone and sees it's an Amber alert*] Oh shit, I was about to freak out. I seriously thought that was the president telling us to stop talking about him. I was about to change my name and move somewhere. That is funny as hell. I know they're spying on us. On our phones, on everything. Sometimes I'll say something and Siri will just come alive, and I'm like, "Bitch, I didn't call for you!" I'm going to become Amish, that's what the fuck I'm going to do. Just get all this technology out of my life.

Q7: *You grew up in a rough part of Washington, D.C. Did you ever feel unsafe, or were your parents able to shield you?*

HENSON: It was what it was. You acclimate to your surroundings if you want to survive. My mom was robbed twice, and I was with her both times, once when I was six and again when I was seven. I'm sure she was petrified. It definitely traumatized me. But her strength is what made me feel safe enough to leave the house again and not be afraid. She didn't give me a choice. The next day, she woke me up and said, "Come on, let's go. Time for school." I couldn't believe it. There she was, getting ready for work with a black eye, trying to cover it with makeup, combing over the bald spot where the guy had pulled out one of her plugs. That's strength. She instilled that in me.

Q8: *Did growing up like that give you street smarts?*

HENSON: Not really. Listen, not everybody from the hood got street smarts. I know some dumbass motherfuckers in the hood, let me tell you. [*laughs*] What gave me street smarts was getting out of the hood. Every weekend, my mom took me to a predominantly white neighborhood in the suburbs to see my cousin Kim. I played with Mary Beth and Karen and Josh, all the kids with the suburban names. It made me well-rounded. You could drop me off anywhere, this little girl from the hood, and I could get along with anybody. That's why I always tell kids, get out of your ZIP code. Education is getting to know other people and other cultures. Most inner-city kids never even get downtown.

Q9: *Were you a rebellious kid, or did you follow the rules?*

HENSON: I followed the rules, because my mother didn't play. She did not play. She put the fear of God into me. And that's what you should do; if you fear your parents, then you ain't going out in the streets acting an ass. The worst I ever screwed up was in seventh grade. I had some girlfriends over, and we started calling phone

sex lines. It was a 999 number. We thought it was like 888—it's free! So we called these numbers, and then a week later my mom got a phone bill for $600. That's more than she paid in rent! I thought she was going to murder me.

Q10: *You grew up idolizing comedians like Carol Burnett and Richard Pryor. What made their comedy so relatable?*

HENSON: I think it's because so much of comedy comes from trauma. That's what drives me sometimes. I've had a lot of trauma in my life. You gotta laugh to keep from crying. It just felt so important to watch this stuff when I was younger. I remember begging my father, "Please, take me to see *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip!*" I was 11. He said, "Okay, but if you tell your mother, this never happened." We got in there, and my dad had a beer and fell straight asleep. I'm sitting watching Pryor talk about dick and pussy. I was mortified. I had to process that shit.

Q11: *On Empire you play a character named Cookie, which was also your nickname in college. How were you first christened as Cookie?*

HENSON: One of my dearest friends in the world, Guinea Bennett, and I started this group called Soul Nation, which later became the Dallas nonprofit theater Soul Rep. We were kids who came of age in the 1970s and were proud of it. When we were at Howard University, Guinea and I and all our friends bought our clothes at thrift stores and wore bell-bottoms. We gave each other new names, like Leroy, Tyrone, things that sounded like the 1970s. Mine was Cookie. The full name was Cookie Gwendolyn Jones. I don't know why they picked Cookie for me. I think it's because I reminded Guinea of her aunt Cookie, who was a spitfire. When I got the job on *Empire,* I called all my college girlfriends and told them, "You will never fucking believe this. I'm Cookie again!"

Q12: *You moved to Los Angeles after college with an infant son and 700 bucks in your pocket. Was that as terrifying as it sounds?*

HENSON: It wasn't really. In your 20s, you're not scared. You feel invincible. I was an artist with a dream, and now that I was a mother I felt like it was do or die. Being a parent is what kept me focused. I didn't go to the clubs, even though they say that's how you're supposed to network. I have common sense, and nothing about that seemed right to me. What networking happens at a club where people are inebriated? Tell me, what contracts are being signed? That's stupid. I knew what I had to offer; I just had to find somebody to hear me. Anytime I felt scared, I'd call my dad.

Q13: *What would he tell you?*

HENSON: He would be like, "Don't you dare give up!" He would just be continuously sowing seeds. He used to tell me I'd get an Oscar someday for playing Diana Ross. [*laughs*] That was his dream. And I believed him. Not about playing

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IF PEOPLE GET OFFENDED BY MY CHARACTERS, I DID MY JOB. BUT DON’T BEAT ME UP.

Diana Ross, but being an actor. He knew I could do it, and he wanted it so bad for me. Just by example, he showed me that nothing can hold you back. He was homeless for a while, but he didn't hide that from me. He'd drive by my school in the van he was living in, give me 50 cents and tell me everything was going to be okay. "Watch me, I'm going to bounce back," he told me. "I'm going to get a motorcycle. I'm going to get a house with a garage in the back so I can work from home." He was proof that whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. If you fail, you just get back up. That's what he did. And in the end, he got his house with the garage and his Harley.

Q14: *Did he live to see your dreams come true?*

HENSON: He saw *Hustle & Flow* happen, and he saw it get the Oscar nominations. He was like, "You're just getting started. You haven't seen nothing yet." He was gone by the time I sang [the Oscar-nominated song "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp"] at the Oscars. He died just two weeks prior. I was with him in the room when it happened. He was spitting up blood, and then he died. So that was fresh in my head, and I didn't really have time to process it. I compartmentalized that pain and sort of numbed myself out. I went through the motions. It was surreal being at the Oscars and looking at all the faces out there, Helen Mirren, Nicole Kidman. And I'm up there singing about bitches and hos, trying not to think about my father's face. [*pauses as eyes water*] As soon as it was over and I went backstage, I just turned off. I had nothing left. They were trying to take me to parties, but I was like, "No, just take me home."

Q15: *Why do you keep the middle initial in your name? Is the P meaningful to you?*

HENSON: My publicist used to tease me about it: "Not to be confused with Taraji *S.* Henson or Taraji *C.* Henson." I was like, "Shut up!" Most people feel like their middle name doesn't mean anything, but mine actually does. The *P* is for Penda, and together with Taraji it means "hope and love" in Swahili. How could I not keep it?

Q16: *It's hard to think of another actress more deserving of her own superhero movie. Have you ever been tempted?*

HENSON: Oh my God, yes! I want to do that so bad! Do you know anyone we can call? There's got to be somebody reading this who can make it happen, one of those superhero movie producers. Hello, I know y'all read PLAYBOY! I don't care what the character is, I'll take it. Just give it to me. I don't give a shit what she looks like; she don't have to be sexy. She can be the bad girl. I don't have to be the hero. I've played a lot of heroes; all my characters are heroes. Cookie is a hero. She's tough, she says the shit you can't say, she stands up for everybody. So I wouldn't mind playing a bad person—like the Joker. They've had like six guys play the Joker already. Time to give a female a chance at it.

Q17: *How are you similar to Cookie? Is there a part of you that could bust up a studio with a baseball bat if somebody crossed you?*

HENSON: My clothes are too expensive, honey. I'm not breaking my nails for that. No, if I'm that mad, I'll see you in court. Or better yet, bye. Just bye. I'll start new and fresh. I don't need the drama. But there's a lot about Cookie I can relate to: I understand her fight for her family. I understand her love for her boys. I have a son. If someone tried to hurt him, I would find the strength to knock you through a brick wall.

Q18: *Your son has struggled with depression, and your dad had depression and PTSD. What gets you out of the emotional quicksand?*

HENSON: I get depressed sometimes, but for me it's not excessive. It's the normal amount of sadness, I think, when there are some days you just can't deal. When I feel it coming, that's when I need to attack my craft. I deal with so much in my performances. Some actors lose themselves in their characters and use it to cover up what they're really feeling. But for me it's just the opposite. Every role, I'm constantly dealing with me, with my issues. It's how I relate to these characters and make them more truthful. It can be very therapeutic. After 20 takes of the same scene, when I'm dealing with these things that are troubling me, it lifts those dark clouds. You go, Wow, I think I'm over that now. I used it and dealt with it, and now it's good. I can move on.

Q19: *Have you ever had a role that nearly killed you emotionally or physically?*

HENSON: I can already tell that the hardest one I'll ever do is playing Emmett Till's mother, and I haven't even finished reading the script yet. John Singleton wrote it, and it's just brutal. Every page is making me ugly-face cry. What's so daunting is you know the outcome. The way John has magically and beautifully written his story, you get to know this kid, and that makes it worse. Why did they have to do this to a child? What threat was he that they had to mutilate him like that? What's so hard is that it gets me thinking about Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown and that nine-year-old kid in Brooklyn a white woman accused of touching her ass. That's what got Emmett Till killed! We're in 2018 and that shit is still happening. I don't know if people are ready for this movie. I don't even know if I am.

Q20: *Do you worry about cultural responsibility? Even if a role is meaty, what if it's perceived as insensitive to the African American community?*

HENSON: What if it's too "hood" or "ghetto"? Yeah, I get that. I worried about that with Cookie when I first got offered the part. I was scared of her. I was like, "What are people going to say?" You have to put the judgment aside. When that fear comes up, it's usually judgment. Everybody may not like these images up on the screen, but, baby, they exist. We didn't pull it out of the sky. If you feel moved by it, go do something. Go to the hood, donate your time so maybe we can start seeing some changes. If people get offended by my characters or feel they're reflecting something back at them they don't want to see, I did my job. I did it so well that it hurt your feelings. [*laughs*] But don't beat me up. Don't kill the messenger. ■

FREE

The open sky and the female form—
a soaring study in contrasting beauties
by a mind-bending Brooklyn artist

FORM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
BLAISE CEPIS

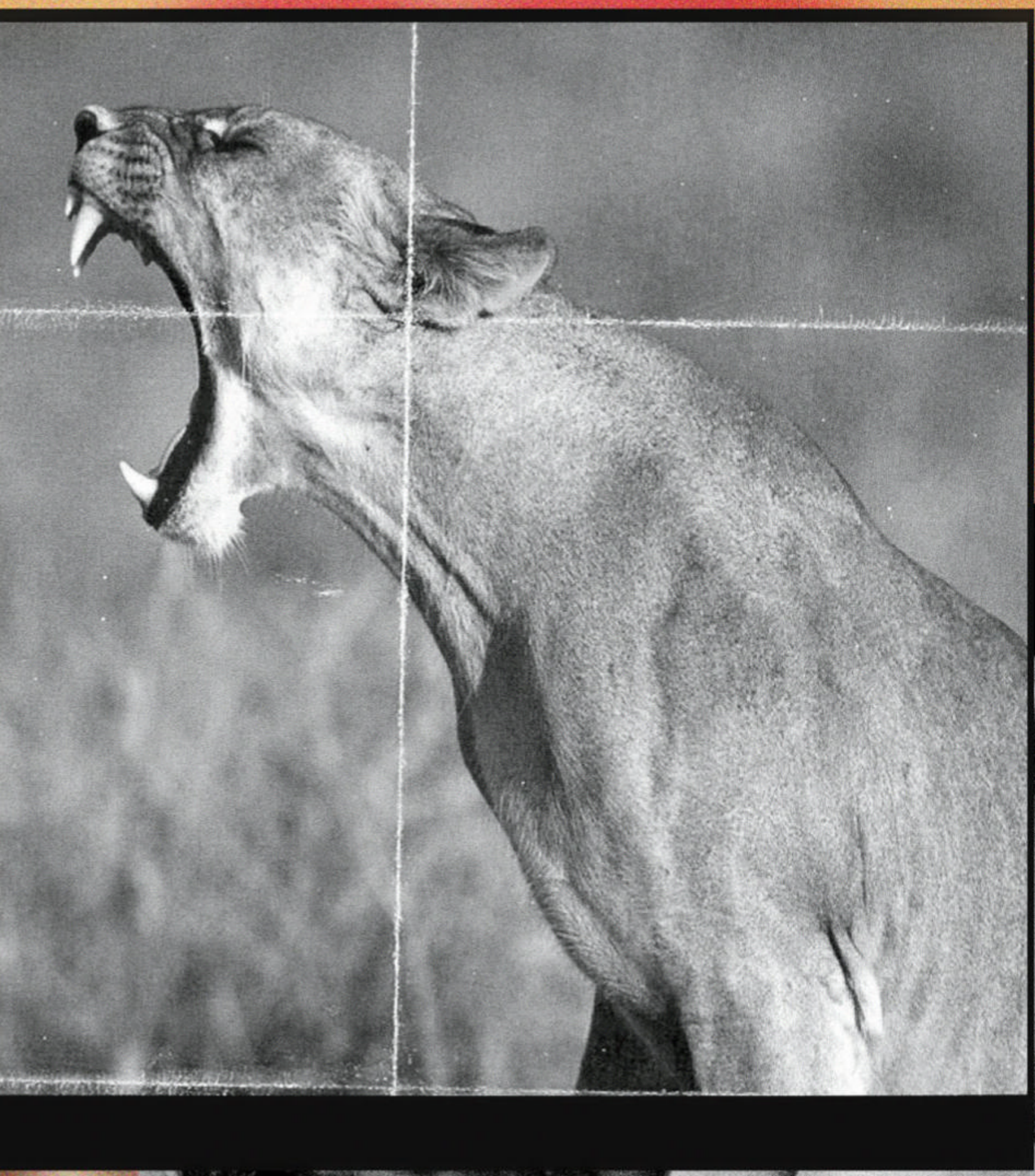
ÉMIR SHIRO

UNCENSORED

FROM AN UNASSUMING FRENCH CITY, A RISING YOUNG ARTIST IS TAUNTING THE BOTS OF INSTAGRAM IN AN EFFORT TO NORMALIZE (AND RETHINK) NUDITY. GOOD NEWS: HE'S GETTING AWAY WITH IT

BY **KEVIN E.G. PERRY**

NATIONAL GE(HOE)GRAPHIC FOR PLAYBOY BY ÉMIR SHIRO



In one collage, Kim Kardashian's perfect ass is perfectly perched on Kanye West's cracked-open calvarium. In another, titled *Oh Yeezus Christ (Original),* a snippet of Kardashian's famous bosom intersects the habit of a Catholic nun. Elsewhere, the president of the United States dons a white baseball cap stitched with the phrase MAKE YEEZY GREAT AGAIN. While the Kardashian-West family aren't the only muses for 27-year-old artist Émir Shiro, within his catalog of some 200 outré art pieces they no doubt reflect an obsession with simultaneously criticizing and celebrating pop culture's bleeding edge. Through Shiro's eyes, the world's most well-known personalities are better understood as composites than at face value. They're also funnier this way and, dare we say, sexier.

It makes sense, then, that Instagram has become Shiro's preferred exhibition space. The platform provides a main line to social media's culture-focused crowds and also serves as a critique-worthy subject itself, be it via his celebrity portrayals or his increasingly popular erotic work. Beyond the fun Shiro finds in appropriating Americana, including the McDonald's golden arches and the Nike swoosh—and even the faces and bodies of the Kardashian-West clan—Instagram's infamous fervor for censorship motivates his exploration of the naked human body. His goal? Edit just enough to elude the bots while still allowing the imagination to soar.

The end products—pieces in which genitalia and breasts are replaced by classical art and asexual inanimate objects—are more evocative than the unaltered nude images. He pixelates the peduncle of a lemon and replaces labia with the clean lines of a kayak floating in a dark expanse. Mona Lisa wears a leather harness; a woman bends over, and her hips flow seamlessly into the pages of a book.

His work is a witty review of our sexualized, saturated but ultimately PG-rated culture of oversharing. Shiro demonstrates an appreciation for Instagram as his generation's proverbial fourth wall: always watching yet permanently invisible. While the app's rigid policing of nude images frustrates many artists, Shiro flirtatiously winks back.

Born and currently residing in Grenoble, France, a city nestled between natural parks in the French Alps, Shiro speaks English coated in the kind of accent that suggests he spends his nights smoking Gauloises and pondering Foucault. His style looks borrowed from Zayn Malik; his chiseled face sports a short, well-kept beard. To complete the romantic impression, a quote from Plato is tattooed across his arm in French: *L'essentiel n'est pas de vivre mais de bien vivre.* The essential thing is not to live but to live well.

"It's important for me to fight taboos," Shiro says. "I don't understand why Instagram accepts the publication of a man's nipple while the publication of a woman's nipple is banned. Artistically, I think we've jumped backward."

Shiro's creative journey began in 2012 when he enrolled in his hometown's art school. From the beginning, he was fascinated by the potential of the human body. He began to upload minimalist yet suggestive illustrations of naked bodies to Instagram. "There were a lot of erotic visuals," he says, "and I was banned because I didn't censor. That's why I started using collage, so that I could keep making work about the human body. Collages allowed me to be reborn."

The discovery of his own "graphic identity," as he calls it, came in 2016 when he created his first collage, *Féline.* The abstract composition shows the lower half of a naked woman kneeling, her torso merging with the front half of a cat, which stretches forward to complete the pose. It's disturbingly seductive and delightfully cheeky. Art fans will notice in *Féline* allusions to two of Shiro's heroes: British painter David Hockney, a progenitor of the 1960s pop art movement, and American artist George Condo, master of deconstructed portraits.

"It was through creating *Féline* that I learned to play with censorship and how that relates to publishing my work," he says. "The body of a woman is interesting to work with because there are many lines, curves and reliefs to exploit. I see it as a landscape."

But Shiro also sees how social media threatens those landscapes. He recalls *Senses'ored,* a collage he created that shows a woman with her knees spread; layered over the space between her legs, two women kiss, the shape of their mouths forming a not-so-subtle diamond. Although the image is provocative, the viewer's imagination is largely responsible for its eroticism, as Shiro has effectively censored the vulva.

To Shiro's surprise, Instagram's moderators deleted the artwork moments after he published it. "I found it funny that it's literally called *Senses'ored.* It doesn't show anything sexually explicit," he says. "My collages can have such a strong trompe l'oeil effect that the moderator—or the bot that is supposed to do the policing—deletes it even when it doesn't break any rules. To me, that's a perfect example of abuse."

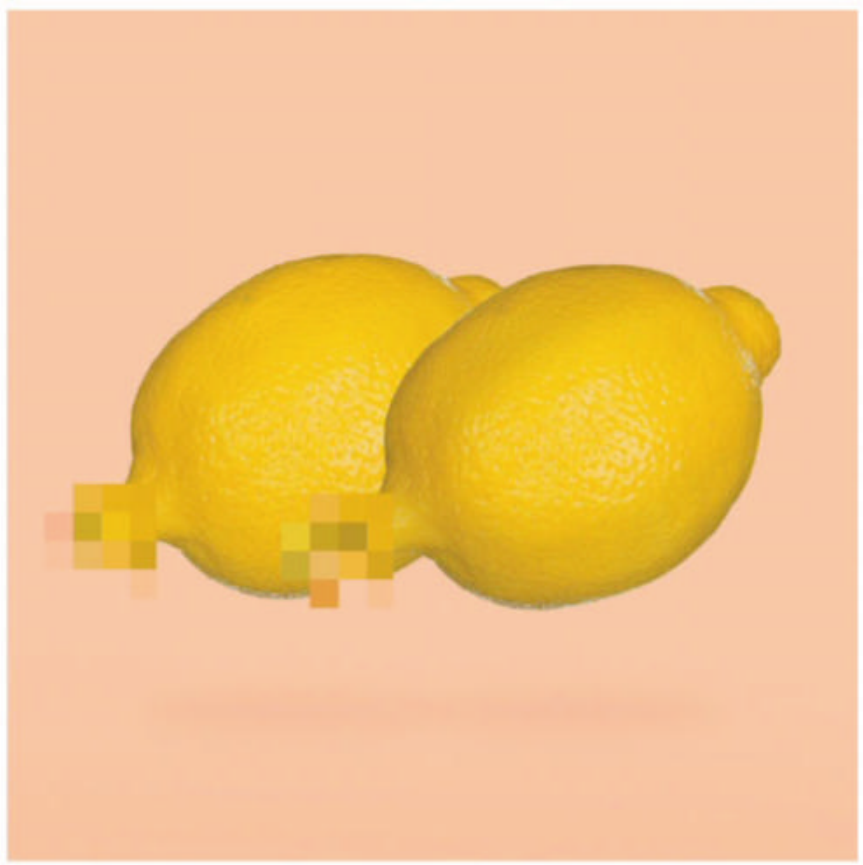
Last April, the Lyon, France–based arts and culture magazine *Ninki* hosted at a local café one of the first public exhibitions of Shiro's work. "He knows how to hijack the codes of pop culture," says the show's curator, Karim Bah. "His pictures are like a rapper's punch lines; they speak directly to our consciousness. To me, Émir Shiro is freedom of expression. He denounces and challenges society without harming people. He also knows how to have fun."

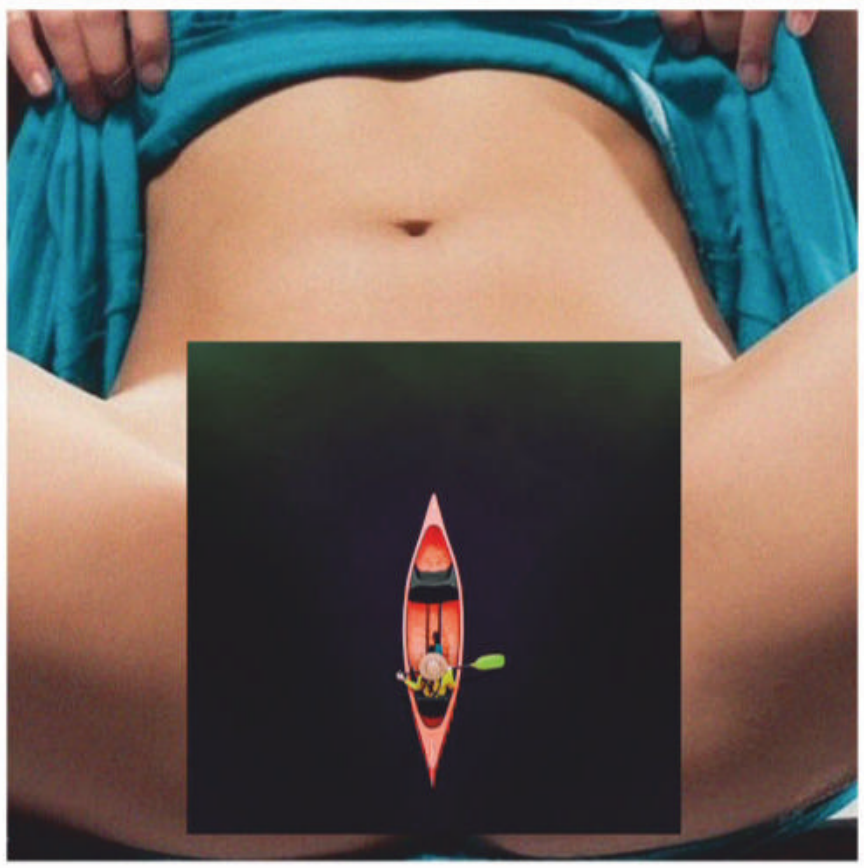
That might explain why his collages featuring reality-TV celebs read so well next to those that reappropriate fine art: No matter the source material, the result amounts to a response to society's views on sex.

The upside, of course, is that sex sells. As Shiro's work has gone viral (he has an online following of more than 110,000), brands, advertisers and collaborators have come calling. "It's crazy how big companies contact me directly. Eighty-five percent of my contracts originate from my Instagram," he says. Swatch is one such partner. Last May, the Swiss watchmaker launched its Skin Irony collection in Paris by inviting Shiro to create images that symbolize its slogan, "Future Classic." He led a workshop on how to merge contemporary images with iconography from the past. With his art earning him thousands every month, he credits Instagram with opening the door to financial opportunities.

"We live in an era when everything is subjected to excessive control."

And yet, as if locked in a perverse yet beautiful dance, the app still sometimes deletes his images. His response to the suppression? Don't stop. Keep pushing boundaries, keep testing limits. "We live in an era when everything is subjected to excessive control," Shiro says. "People need to smile—especially in the world we live in." ■





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *HOT AIR BALLOON, ASSPIRATION, FÈLINE, WET A MINUTE, HEALTHY FOOD PORN, SENSORED*

ROXANE GAY IS NOT SORRY

Getting to know one of our most important and accessible cultural commentators—a woman who can call out rape culture and sing the praises of *Law & Order: SVU* in a single op-ed

BY **JESSICA P. OGILVIE**

Sitting on an Eames-style bar stool next to a white marble kitchen island in her Los Angeles home, Roxane Gay swipes through a music app, searching for something to set the mood and singing the praises of her in-house sound system.

"Oh my God, it's the world's best speakers," she says. Settling on Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, she hits PLAY on "Hold Up" and the song comes washing in from all sides. Gay is an avowed fan; she all but live-tweeted the Carters' On the Run II concert at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California last September.

Dressed in a slate-blue shirt and jeans, Gay is addressing a makeup artist, PLAYBOY's photography team and me. She's relaxed and chatty, her honey-smooth voice edged with a wry wit.

It's an outgoing side of the 44-year-old author and columnist—one that is not always on display. When we first meet, a few days before, Gay is decidedly more reserved. Opening the door with a warm hello, she pads quietly past two carefully curated bookcases, offering me water and a seat on the couch. She joins me, sitting beneath the slanted living room roof and across from a sliding glass door that looks out onto a sun-drenched patio, and we chat about John Branch's book *The Last Cowboys,* a copy of which is on the table.

But Gay keeps her legs and arms crossed, responding to my attempts at small talk with single sentences capped by faint smiles. I don't know whether to read this as innate shyness or a practiced technique to avoid revealing too much to journalists. After all, over the past several years Gay has put her opinions and her personal life on display through her writing, becoming a go-to critic on the most urgent cultural buttons: rape culture, #MeToo, gun control, racism, Louis C.K., Brett Kavanaugh and Roseanne Barr. Unafraid to call out privilege, hypocrisy or entrenched social injustice, Gay has an ever-growing corpus, 530,000 Twitter followers tracking her every move and legions of fans lined up at her events, clutching books for her to sign.

So it's understandable if she's tired of saying what she thinks—or wary of what might be made of her words.

"I'm still a work in progress," she says. "I'm giving myself permission to be human and to be flawed and also to protect myself. It's taken a long time to get to a place where I'm willing to do that, but I am."

• • •

Roxane Gay emerged as a public thinker to reckon with sometime around the early

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **RYAN PFLUGER**

“MEN NEED TO START HOLDING EACH OTHER ACCOUNTABLE AND SAYING, ‘YOU KNOW WHAT? THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE.’ ”

2010s with an explosive essay published on an indie blog. But she was a fiction writer first, beginning at a very young age.

Raised primarily in Omaha, Nebraska by Haitian parents, Gay traveled frequently thanks to her father’s work as an engineer. She routinely started over at new schools with new friends, returning to Omaha between her father’s projects. This constant change, along with what she describes as her naturally “not super social” temperament, fanned her love of storytelling—a love she discovered around the age of four, when she would pen short fables on napkins. She followed this passion through high school, college and graduate school, eventually landing a job teaching English at Purdue University in Indiana.

Gay wrote essays and reportage in addition to her fiction, but it wasn’t until she penned a 2011 piece for The Rumpus that demand for her voice began to intensify. The essay, “The Careless Language of Sexual Violence,” was a response to a *New York Times* article about the gang rape of an 11-year-old girl that focused on the aftermath of the event and the way it affected the town and the perpetrators’ lives—seemingly more interested in those concerns than the way the horrific crime affected the victim.

“The article was like, ‘Oh, the poor town is reeling,’ ” she says, “and I was just like, ‘Huh, really? I’m pretty sure the child is reeling.’ I was just incensed, and so I wrote this essay in about two hours.”

Her response took the newspaper to task, speculating as to how the writer, James McKinley Jr., could be “more concerned about the 18 men than one girl,” and concluded that as a society we have become “anesthetized or somehow willfully distanced from such brutal realities” as gang rape. The essay became part of a teeming online conversation about how newspapers cover sexual assault—and put Gay on the map as a fearless and incisive cultural commentator.

“That was the first moment in this stage of my career,” she says. “After that, there was an audience for what I had to say, and so I just kept writing my opinions.”

Those opinions have since appeared in the pages of the *Times* itself, where she is a contributing writer, as well as in dozens of other publications. In 2014 she published a book of essays entitled *Bad Feminist;* it became a *New York Times* best-seller. She co-penned a Marvel comic, *Black Panther: World of Wakanda,* and 2017 saw the publication of her memoir, *Hunger,* as well as *Difficult Women,* a book of short stories. In 2018 she edited two books, *The Best American Short Stories* and *Not That Bad: Dispatches From Rape Culture,* plus a series of essays on the publishing platform Medium called *Unruly Bodies.*

Gay is known for her formidable output—in addition to the above publication schedule, she clocked at least 58 speaking engagements in 2018 alone—but she’s most recognized for her singular way of wielding a pen. Her opinion pieces are pointed and unequivocal and yet delivered with keen self-awareness. She says what she means in clear, concise sentences, the English professor brought to bear. And she’s not bashful about using herself as a reference point: She talks openly about the challenges of being a black woman, a bisexual woman and, in her own words, a “fat woman” in a society that would punish her for all of the above.

More recently, Gay has written multiple *Times* columns on the #MeToo movement and all its twists and subplots. A primary thread in her writing is our country’s outsize concern for the welfare of the accused men, which tends to far exceed concern for the victims. In an August 29, 2018 op-ed entitled “Louis C.K. and Men Who Think Justice Takes As Long As They Want It To,” Gay wrote that public figures like C.K. who have been accused of sexual misconduct have “fallen from grace, but they have had mighty soft landings.” The victims, though, “have been disbelieved. They have had to withstand accusations that they are seeking attention. Justice has been grandly elusive.”

She continued her train of thought following the Brett Kavanaugh Senate hearings, in an October 5, 2018 piece, “I Thought Men Might Do Better Than This.” On the testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, Gay wrote, “Despite everything we know about the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment, women are still not believed. Their experiences are still minimized. And the male perpetrators of these crimes are given all manner of leniency.” She went on to note that a handful of accused men are beginning to complain about their treatment by the public, calling journalist John Hockenberry’s *Harper’s* essay examining his life after sexual harassment claims “aggressively self-pitying.” Former CBC Radio host Jian Ghomeshi “presents himself as the misunderstood hero of his own narrative” in his *New York Review of Books* post-accusation essay, “Reflections From a Hashtag.” And Kavanaugh, she wrote, was “a self-indulgent brat” during his confirmation hearings. (It’s worth noting that her article, with its careful analysis and focused anger, begins with a meditation on *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit;* few critics can juggle politics and pop culture as deftly as Gay.)

When I ask her what drives this willingness to say what so many women—and, I presume, men—are thinking, Gay responds, “I just try to be as honest as I can and as open as I can.”

• • •

For her opinions, Gay attracts frequent dissenters, many of whom confront her on Twitter. But Gay, whose Twitter bio includes the line “If you clap, I clap back,” seldom hesitates to respond. A brief scroll through her feed will turn up several such exchanges. With her talent for well-aimed ripostes, she has learned to enjoy the platform’s famously indecorous tone.

“In general, I just try to engage with people who are interesting or funny, and then of course the occasional troll, and that’s just for fun,” she says. “It’s like a pressure release. I mean, you have the audacity to speak to me that way? Well, then whatever happens next is on you.”

For the most part, Gay says, she has no regrets about what she writes. Indeed,

her thoughts seem to roll out of her mouth fully formed; as our conversation continues, I often feel as if she's dictating an op-ed directly into my tape recorder.

"People are going to respond to my work how they respond, and that's fine," she says. "But I know I can handle the consequences of having my opinion."

I wonder aloud if Gay has ever experienced fear or regret with regard to her work—as most writers do—and by now I'm expecting a no.

"Yeah," she says, "only once. I mean, I always experience fear, because I write about fairly volatile topics, but the one thing I was afraid of and that I regret not doing more was writing in support of Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election."

At the time, she explains, it felt dangerous. Clinton supporters were picked apart, as was the candidate herself. And in an uncharacteristic moment, Gay let that outside pressure affect her.

"I really thought that Hillary was an outstanding candidate, but people have so many very vocal and very deeply entrenched opinions about her, and when you support her publicly, there's a lot of backlash," she says. "There were definitely times when I thought, Oh, I could write an op-ed about this, and I just got overwhelmed. And I thought, I don't have the time to deal with this, and I do regret that."

After Trump was elected, she says, she promised herself she would never again hold back out of fear. "I'll just live with the fear

and make myself uncomfortable," she says, "and say what needs to be said."

• • •

Gay's followers might fervently agree with her politics, but her work also resonates with many on a deeper level. A large part of her writing in recent years has centered around self-revelation, around publicly digging through the darkest parts of her past and the darkest corners of her mind. In *Hunger,* she writes frankly and heartbreakingly about the gang rape she suffered at the age of 12. She writes about how she used food as a way to take back a semblance of control, to make "my body into what I needed it to be—a safe harbor rather than a small, weak vessel that betrayed me."

In doing press for the book, Gay repeatedly explained that she didn't really want to write it but felt compelled to do so.

"I was just reluctant to write the book because I knew it was going to require a level of vulnerability that was going to be difficult," she says, "and it was going to make me feel very exposed out in the world. But I also knew that I wanted to write a book about fatness that I would have loved to have read at any point in my adult life, and one that wasn't grounded in inspiration and weight loss."

It's that ability to be so raw in her prose, says actress and author Amber Tamblyn, that's behind the zeal of Gay's fans. Tamblyn hosts a reading series with Gay called Feminist AF, and she believes that Gay possesses a combination of intellect and openness rare among Ph.D.s—and that she's one of the very few academic writers willing to descend from the ivory tower.

"She comes from this high-status world as a professor, as a woman of that stature, which I think often is a world that talks down to people," says Tamblyn. "But Roxane writes and speaks from the heart. When you read her work, you feel like, 'Oh my God, I am sitting in the living room with this dope-ass woman who is really funny and really smart and I'm learning a lot from her.' But it feels like you're getting to know her on a deeper level too. She's just a really down-to-earth person, and that's a breath of fresh air."

As willing as she is to put herself in the line of fire through telling her story and speaking her truth, Gay recognizes that doing so is not for everyone, particularly at a time when speaking one's truth for the greater good does not necessarily result in change.

"It's women and marginalized people who consistently do things for the greater good, and the greater good tends to be widely indifferent to that," says Gay. "I think it's a personal choice [to tell your own truth]. I think you don't have to."

What she would like to see is more men leading the charge to change the climate.

"Men listen to other men," she says. "They don't listen to women. We clearly see that, so men need to start holding each other accountable and saying, 'You know what? This is unacceptable. You don't get to be out in the world acting any old way.' And until men hold one another accountable, I don't think we're going to see any change at all."

• • •

Back at the shoot, *Lemonade* continues to fill the room as Gay gets her hair and makeup done. She's still bantering with the photo team when the opening strains of another song come on—the taut, insistent beat of "Sorry."

As I get up to leave, the chorus begins. It could be a direct response from Gay to anyone who would ask her to keep her truths, in all their pain, rage, humor and complexity, to herself:

Sorry, I ain't sorry
Sorry, I ain't sorry
I ain't sorry
No no, hell nah. ■

29

29

François!

INSUFFICIENT POSTAGE

29

I knew we'd be together again!

PETITION FOR DIVORCE

NICHOLAS GUREWITCH

The **Modern** *Era*

A WOULD-BE WRITER HAS TROUBLE PLOTTING THE OUTLINE OF HIS OWN ROMANCE; IT'S FEAR AND LOVING IN LOS ANGELES

BY **SARAH BRAUNSTEIN**

I had no intention of marrying Maryanne. Six months with her was long enough. Six months was longer than I wanted to be with any woman, even one as pretty as Maryanne.

We were not a decade out of college, my friends and I, and no one was in any hurry to pair up. We liked to drink. That was our primary activity. We drank at brunch, and we brunched several times a week, and we drank at dinner, and we ate out together most nights. Maryanne was not one of us. She didn't drink, or go to comedy clubs or bars, or want to be an actor or a writer or a comic. She had not gone to college. She was the receptionist at my dentist's office.

I loved my dentist. His name was Dr. Guerra. He had an exceedingly quiet voice and slow, methodical hands, and he was tall and trim like a dancer. I admired the linen wallpaper in his office and his glossy succulents. His receptionist too, who sat behind the desk looking faintly alarmed. You could say she dressed like an immigrant, Kmart jeans and generic athletic shoes, but she was white from Nebraska. Her bras were tiny yet industrial. She was the only person I knew who'd grown up in a trailer park, and the only person I knew who sent money home.

"Not a *trailer park,*" Maryanne said. "A motor home lodge."

The distinction struck me as noble and pitiful. I feared going to this place. I did not want to meet Maryanne's parents.

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On the day I planned to break up with Maryanne, I woke with an erection that was not for her. A blurry figure swayed in my mind, dream residue, a redhead, and I thought, Good, a redhead. I want to say I invented her, and I suppose I did, but she resembled a TV star of the moment because I was not very original. The TV star was on billboards all over the city, lit from beneath at night.

I messaged Kyla and Chris S. and Chris K. and Lucy that I was going to break up with Maryanne and meet them afterward for a drink. *Aww, really? Poor Maryanne! Such a sweetheart!* But they didn't know her well, had said hello only a few times, and Lucy said: *We'll drink to your sorrows. We've missed you, baby.*

I'd missed them too. It would be good to be back in the fold. We were like sitcom friends—raised on sitcoms, now auditioning and writing for them, we modeled our lives on these shows. Our friendship group had its own cultures, traditions, holiday specials, ancillary friend groups. Some of

ILLUSTRATION BY **SPIROS HALARIS**

HOLLYWOOD

us had trust funds. Most of us were white. We dated each other sometimes, or dated a member of a side group, and then came back and cracked jokes about it. Maryanne, I knew, was a short arc. She didn't have a TV or a computer. She had no aesthetic, and she was not funny. She thought stand-up was "braggy." My friends had understood, had not begrudged my nights away, because she was sexy, they agreed, in a complicated way, like a sexy Anne Frank.

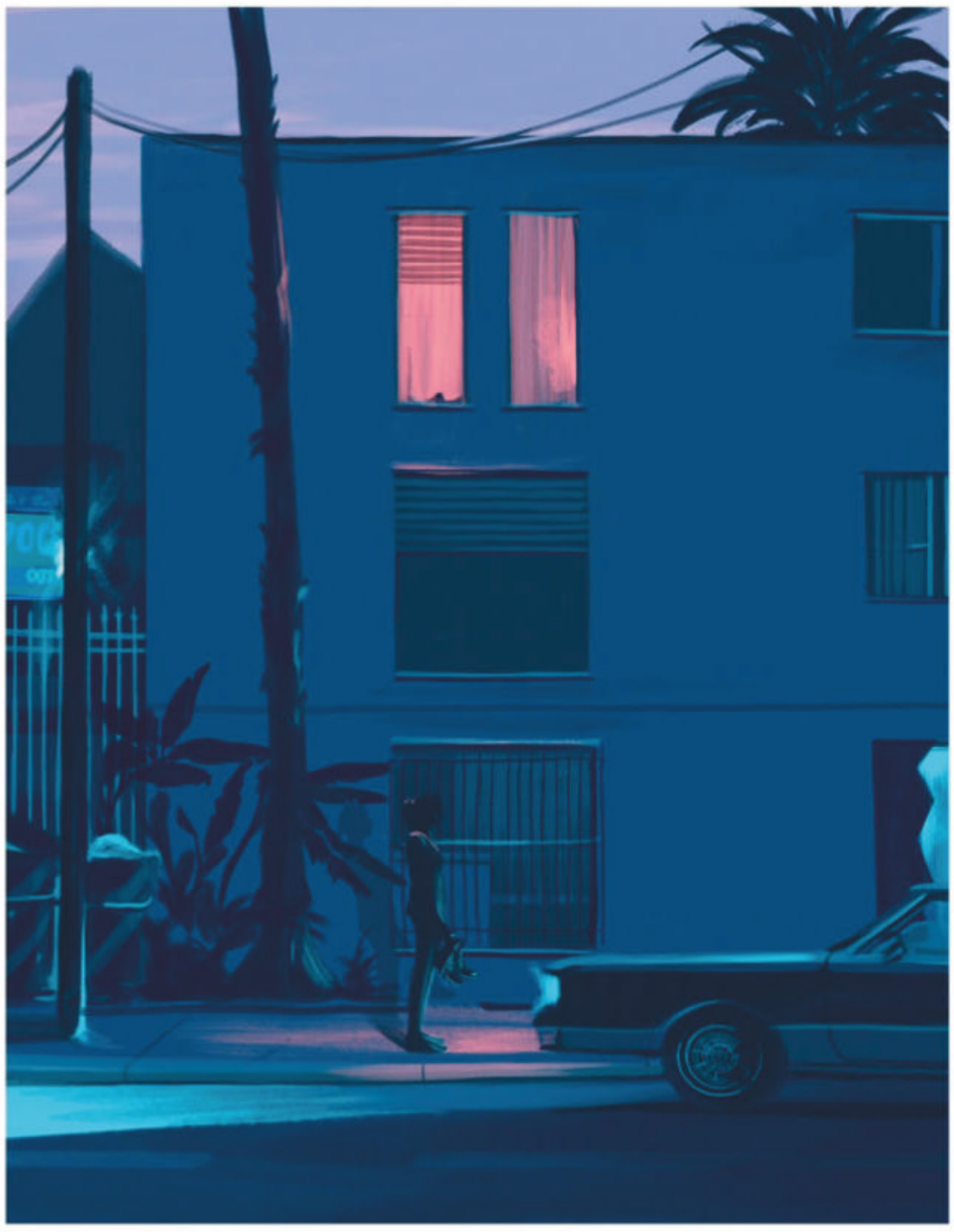
I called her at work. "Can I pick you up at four? I think we should go for a walk."

"Yes, please," she said. "I'd like that very much."

• • •

Maryanne was wrong to have had it bad for me. I was the oldest of three blonde boys from the suburbs of Philly. I had been given an Audi on my 16th birthday, which I crashed three weeks later. I kept a list of the women I slept with, most of whose names I remembered. Maryanne's name, on the day I prepared to break up with her, wasn't the last one.

Maryanne had no list. She kept a diary. She read historical novels and *Time* magazines from Dr. Guerra's office. I had never known someone who wasn't a grandmother to read *Time*. She slept in a long nightgown, a column of nonworking buttons on its bib, and she would never try cocaine, or bubble tea, and she would not come to the nude Korean baths, which I considered one of the great wonders of Los Angeles. In bed she was shy, hot with shame. Sometimes she snorted with embarrassed laughter. She hadn't gone down on me yet or let me go down on her. It's the modern era, I wanted to say. Her goodness de-sexed her. I didn't want the job of her.



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"Don't you want to *be* something?" I asked her once, early on. I felt I could be bold with her—nothing I said seemed to hurt her.

"I have a job," she'd replied, shrugging. We were in her apartment, on a street in Hollywood. She was sweeping her buckling linoleum floor and I was sitting in a chair, drinking a beer, watching her. She wore pink canvas sneakers. She had a cheap corn-husk broom that disintegrated as you swept, so that you ended up sweeping the broom pieces, so that the chore just went on and on.

"Don't you want more than a *job*?"

"I have more than that," she said, and rested the broom against the wall, came over to sit on my lap. She wore tiny golden earrings, like Puerto Rican babies. When I sucked one between my teeth it felt like a bullet.

But we couldn't even watch TV together. She had the worst taste, loved the battling pastry chefs, ninjas on the monkey bars. At night she rubbed Vaseline on her elbows and on the soles of her feet. She washed her face with a bar of orange Dial. When she called Nebraska she spoke to her father in low, soothing tones. A drunk, I presumed. I knew that voice. That was how you talked to a drunk. But I didn't ask because I didn't want to know. I was not interested. I smoked cigarettes outside.

• • •

I liked the drive to Dr. Guerra's office. I liked seeing the Santa Monica pier, the Ferris wheel turning over the ocean, liked knowing there were sharks out there—not a lot of the time, no, but there *could* be sharks, and a person could theoretically be mauled or eaten. That this horror might happen in such proximity to Dr. Guerra's office disturbed me pleasantly. Maryanne was waiting out front, standing on the curb slightly pigeon-toed, her big purse hooked on her elbow.

I kissed her hello. This would be the last time I'd kiss her.

In the car she told me about a boy who'd come to the office that day. He was under the impression that the dentist was going to remove his teeth. *Clean* them, Maryanne had explained, but he hadn't seemed to understand. The kid looked so sorrowful, she told me, so resigned, when the hygienist came to take him.

Dr. Guerra gave his Thursdays to the underserved community. Sanctuary dentistry, he called it.

"Poor kid," she said, gazing out the window.

"Well, that poor kid has the best dentist in L.A.," I said. "He's got that."

She said, "I didn't go to a dentist until I was 14." There was no pity in her voice and no expectation for pity. Sometimes she did that: leveled an awful fact on me with a kind of bemused indifference. She never saw a dentist. Or: The bus driver fondled her. Other rotten things spoken so calmly, acceptingly, it made me almost sick. Where was her sense of violation?

We were driving to Griffith Park. That would be a good place to do it, I thought. She would not make a scene there. But the ride was too long and traffic was worse than usual, several roads shut down for protests or festivals, and I realized halfway there that I should have found a nearer park, but then it was too late to turn around. I considered doing it right there, in the car, in steamy traffic, except that struck me as indecent. And so we went

on. And since Maryanne never had too much to say—I was the talker—we passed the ride mostly in silence.

• • •

When we arrived at Griffith Park there was a sign: PARKING FULL. NO PARKING BEYOND THIS POINT! SHUTTLE TO OBSERVATORY 25 CENTS.

I had been hoping to find a spot close to the top. I didn't like this extra step. Complicated transit would make the breakup harder, add to the awkwardness. But there we were, and so I parked and we walked to the place where the shuttle came, a dusty cutout on the side of the road.

A Chinese family with an ancient grandmother stood there waiting. There were six of them. The grandmother wore beautiful red silk shoes covered with roadside dust, like something you'd see on a movie poster.

"Only a *quarter*? Nothing costs a quarter anymore," Maryanne said to me. She seemed genuinely happy.

"Nothing indeed!" said the man whose arm was linked with the ancient woman's.

Maryanne held a quarter between the thumb and index finger of each hand. She had a wary smile on her face, and red cheeks, like a child in the line for the scariest ride at the fair.

More people joined us to wait. Two women spoke loudly about the national darkness. The crowd hummed with agreement. Even the grandmother lifted a bony ancient finger in solidarity. The impeachment hearings were in their infancy in those days, and everyone in Los Angeles walked around peaceably raving.

"I wish we could go someplace and not hear about him," Maryanne whispered in my ear. "Can you take me to the desert this weekend?"

"I've got a busy weekend."

"Someplace where he's not screaming. Take me there."

"There's no place like that left," I told her.

She had not voted for anyone. Neither had I. But her parents in Nebraska had voted for him. Mine did too, but I didn't tell her this, because I never spoke of my parents.

The shuttle arrived and we all crammed on. There were only a few seats on the sides, and the old people and children took them. Maryanne was too short to reach the handrail so I held her. In this way I took responsibility for us both. I wanted to be a good boyfriend to the end—to look like one.

The shuttle smelled of gas and industrial cleaner. It wheezed its way up the mountain switchbacks. I had been on this road many times and so did not participate in the appreciation of nature along with everyone else. I prepared what I was going to say. Then, to gather my nerve, I thought about the redhead.

But I forgot that Maryanne had never been to the observatory before. I had failed to realize that this iconic place would be new to her. And so when we arrived, when we got to the center of the courtyard, to that highest place above the city, Maryanne stopped walking. She blinked, turned in a circle. It was only then, watching her take in the view, the Hollywood sign, the telescopes, the sun beginning its descent, that I understood how unkind it was to do it here. It was a landmark. I would ruin it for her. What had I been thinking? Who orchestrates a destination *breakup*?

Which was funny, actually. I made a note to use that.

"Oh, Tanner!" she cried. "Tanner!" Because she had come from the plains, of course, she had never seen such a view. She pointed to Spanish roofs. She pointed to City Hall, to all the cars below, to downtown. She marveled at the color of the sky. Like a jelly bean! Like sherbet! Oh, Tanner! And yes, I thought about holding off. Going down after sunset, grabbing dinner at a Chinese dive I liked in Los Feliz. We could break up over lo mein. I considered this, but would it have been kinder? I imagined the awkwardness of the fortune cookies.

I didn't expect she'd stay in the city for much longer. Surely she'd return to Nebraska and lick her wounds. There'd be a new receptionist at Dr. Guerra's office. Maryanne would find a much better match back in Nebraska, could pick anyone she wanted back there. Any doughy ex-quarterback would kill for her, any sweetheart cop. I wanted this for her. I wanted her to go away and also, somehow, to remain the receptionist.

We paused at an overlook. "A postcard," Maryanne said. "Isn't it?" She made her hands the shape of a postcard and looked through them.

The slashes of light on the ground were the streets where I met my friends. Love for the city filled my heart. Love for the city vanquished her winsomeness. I said what I had prepared to say.

I'm sorry. You deserve better. Not ready for commitment. Not ready for monogamy. *Monogamy:* I used that word several times. It was such a welcome addition to the breakup toolbox. An ideological word, something to consider strenuously. People were polyamorous those days the way they were vegans. It was a way to ethically sleep around, to feel honest and devious at once, and I said, "Look, I don't think monogamy is working out for me right now. I feel I should be honest. I tried it, I gave it a shot...." I went on and on and she listened without expression.

Then she said, "I wanted to go to the desert this weekend. Are you saying you want to see other people? Like, along with me? Me and other people too? Or you want me gone? I'd really like to go to the desert."

"I don't want you *gone,* Maryanne. That's so extreme. Why do you have to say it like that?"

She raised and lowered her bony shoulders. Her expression was baleful, pale. She looked exactly as I'd feared, prettily stricken. It's easy to get sentimental about pretty people, I told myself. Be done. In and out. But I found myself dissembling. I said, "I need some space. That's all. I need to think. Give me some time. I'm not saying we should end it permanently. But a break. We're just so unalike, you and me."

She blinked. "But you're just like me," she said.

You're a goddamn extraterrestrial, I wanted to say, and then I did. I held my breath, waited for her response, but it didn't

I thought about holding off. Going down after sunset, grabbing dinner at a Chinese dive. We could break up over lo mein.

seem to faze her, which only made me more committed to ending it. She said, "If I drank, if I went to bars with you, would you keep me around?"

"Why do you put it that way? You want to be *kept around*? Jesus. You're way too pretty to be so needy."

"I used to drink," she said finally, resolvedly. "I can do it again. I used to. Beer in my bedroom. All alone. And then vodka."

"You realize how compliant you are? Why are you *like* that?"

"I'm like you," she said. "I keep telling you."

I wanted her eyes to leak, wanted those tears to spill over, so I told her then about the two women I'd slept with during the six months we'd been dating. I told her about Vivian, about Vivian's private piercings, and about the woman I met at the Magic Castle whose name I never got, who appeared on the list only as *Magic Castle*. I told her about the list. I was a pig, I swore to her. I substantiated my argument.

When the redhead moved toward the bathroom, I found myself following her. She stopped. She turned.

"Oh," she said, taking a step back. "You did those things?"

"I did," I said. "I do."

"I misunderstood," she said. "I thought——"

She began to cry but fought it, pawed ruthlessly at her eyes. She made a bleating sound, covered her mouth, looked down. She stayed like that for a bit. When she raised her head again she looked calmer. She said in a calm, tired voice, "I'll miss you, Tanner."

"I'll miss you too," I told her. And maybe I would miss her, but I'd never have to go to Nebraska, never set foot in the double-wide. A glorious *never* thrummed in my body. I would never have to bring her to my parents. She would not see the picture of me on the piano, never see my child face, helpless before an ice cream cone, in a silver frame. Good riddance, Maryanne, you pathetic creature. Those words passed through my brain. I believed I was owed more.

• • •

There was an insane person on the shuttle down. A middle-aged man, two kids with him, Indian, or maybe Pakistani, and he said things like "Oh my God we're going to die. Oh my God he's going too fast. Oh no, no, this isn't good. Oh no. Oh hell. Too fast." No one else spoke. The shuttle descended. And it did feel treacherous, the pitch steep, brakes whining, but people do not fly off the road in Los Angeles. "Much too fast!" the crazy man said. "This thing can't handle it. I know machines. This is not a safe machine."

One of his kids was very young, elementary age, and played with his phone. The other boy was a teenager. "Okay, Dad," the teenager said. "We're safe. Everything's good."

"Do you hear that? Too fast."

Maryanne could reach her handrail now, the handicapped one, so I didn't have to hold her.

"We'll fly off," the insane man said. "That lady," and he gestured toward Maryanne, closest to the door, "she'll fly out."

I felt my chest get hot. I was angry that he put her in his imagination, that he would throw her out of this vehicle, even in his mind.

"No one's flying out," said the teenager.

"She might!"

And I put my arm around her shoulder, around Maryanne's shoulder, but she pulled away. The crazy father saw this. He smirked at me.

Maryanne surprised me. She looked at the man, and she did not smile, and she said, "I will not fall out."

The man was still smirking at me. So was the son.

It's over, I told myself. Let it be over.

The Chinese family, they were there too, all of us hurtling down. I willed us to crash. On my phone I found several messages from my friends inquiring about the state of things, hurrying me along. They were leaving Good Luck Bar and heading to Bigfoot.

• • •

Sometimes a celebrity would appear at Bigfoot and everyone would suck in their guts and throw back their shoulders and perform normalcy. I wanted that. That was what I wanted forever. To be coming up. To wonder every morning how it would turn out. Maybe I would be one of those people someday, someone you couldn't feel normal around. That seemed the very best thing in the world. I wanted it for all of us, for me and my friends. I wanted to get it and confer it onto them, or for someone, any one of them, to confer it onto me. You couldn't date a girl like Maryanne if you were a person like this; you certainly couldn't marry her.

• • •

A soon as we were back in my car the mountain was impossible to fathom. Neither of us spoke. I felt like I was driving my daughter in a car without seatbelts. No one seemed safe or out for anyone but themselves. I felt that I'd been assigned the task to care for this girl, and that I was too jealous to give the task to another man but couldn't do it myself.

The protests had settled down. It was dinner time. Food trucks everywhere. Nowhere wasn't a restaurant. Crowds of people milled around, jaywalking, collecting spare change, screaming epithets or singing, or being trailed by cameras, and it took forever to get to Maryanne's street.

"I'm fine, Tanner," she said when I pulled up in front. She unbuckled her seatbelt. "You shouldn't worry about me. You shouldn't feel guilty. Okay? I'm *fine*."

I said I was glad she was fine. I said, again, I was sorry. I was sure I would never see her again.

Then she said, "What about your boots?"

My boots! I had forgotten. My favorite boots—brown leather lace-ups, leather soles, Italian. Very expensive. She called them my Civil War boots. Which might have been funny.

Maybe she was funny.

They were by her bed, the boots. All at once I didn't trust myself. Why would I leave my boots there? I felt sick, suddenly, sour air rising into my sinuses.

She said, "Stay here. I'll be right back. I'll get them——" and she leapt from the car and hurried up the walk, took the stairs two at a time to her studio apartment.

Her twin bed was up there, her purple sheets, her dresser top scattered with pennies. She had almost nothing. Just an alarm clock, a water glass, her sad communion

cross on a gold chain. She lived like a survivor of a natural disaster in a room at the YMCA.

She was not funny.

I gripped the steering wheel and took long deep breaths until the nausea began to fade.

On our first date I'd taken her to sushi. She had some sort of allergy to the wasabi and later said her mouth hurt too much to kiss. In the morning the skin around her lips was raw and scabbed, and Dr. Guerra gave her some prescription cream. "Wasn't that *nice* of him?" she kept saying, gazing at the tube in her hand. "I'd have paid a hundred at the clinic for that. Wasn't it awfully nice of him, Tanner?"

Did she have a crush on the dentist? I wondered but I didn't worry. I admired Dr. Guerra, trusted him, and I knew he was too decent to exploit her. He was like a father. The way he tilted his head and examined her poor sore burned mouth was how a father does, how a father is supposed to do, which made him, I sometimes joked, my father-in-law.

When Maryanne came back to the car she had my boots in a plastic bag. The bag was from a Mexican place where we sometimes got takeout. I gave her the empty bag, but I still felt like I might throw up, so I said, "Give it back?" and stuffed it between my thighs. She looked at my crotch, expressionless. Her face was empty of feeling. I did not like this face.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll get over it."

"You will?"

"Doesn't everyone?" She shrugged. "It's a breakup. I'll move on."

I did not know this practical Maryanne. I didn't know her at all.

"Don't go, Maryanne," I said.

"What?"

"Please don't."

"You're the one who's going," she said.

It was true. It was plain to see. I was sitting in the driver's seat, buckled in, the car running. My beloved boots in the passenger seat. Nothing felt truer than this. Nothing was holding me back.

• • •

I love my wife so much. It amazes me that I almost gave her away. I turned off the car. I unbuckled. I got out, and I knelt down, I rested my knee on the oily pavement, and I asked her. Her face was calm and blank. No fold between her eyebrows. She said, "I don't know." And we looked at each other until, finally, she spoke.

"I will," she said.

I felt so sorry for her. I told her so.

"Feel how you like," she said.

We went together to Bigfoot and announced our engagement. My friends were stunned, but after a few drinks it all seemed pretty hysterical. We clinked glasses and danced and Lula played the songs we asked for, gangster rap and Dolly Parton, the last blast of irony for a very long time. Because I didn't know we'd actually move to Nebraska. I didn't know that before too long I'd find myself in a cul-de-sac with three daughters. Three girls and an aboveground pool, in which two sisters would swim in a circle, creating a whirlpool so that the little one, in her inflatable pink vest, could spin. I didn't think we'd really get married. I only knew I didn't want her to go, that I had to fix the cruelty of the evening, and that's what I came up with because I am not very original.

It was barely nine o'clock, night just beginning. I drank and she drank, we drank a good deal, and soon they set upon her, my girlfriends, these waifish and fey women, actresses, would-be models, women with head shots and podcasts. I had slept with half of them. All night they circled Maryanne, gazed at her with new attention, stroked her sleeves, her hair, examined her with comic reverence, professing their sister love in high, parodic voices. Maryanne looked so anxious again, being touched like that. I liked that she looked anxious again. Go down on her tonight, I told myself.

I was starting on my third drink when the redhead walked in. There she was. Not the dream figure or the celebrity but a better amalgam, real and not-real, herself and made-for-me. And everyone was busy with Maryanne and no one was paying attention to me, so when the redhead moved toward the bathroom, I found myself following her.

A woman like the redhead knows when she is being followed, which is all the time. She stopped. She turned. We stood facing each other, there in the dim back hall of Bigfoot, and I felt a voice call out to me—my voice but not mine, a future me, a graver me. Hold steady, champ, is what the voice said. And I said back, Why should I?

There was an old pay phone still mounted on the wall. Next to it, a framed needlepoint sampler said CALL YOUR MOTHER. I had not called my mother in a very long time and I did not want to. The presence of that sign aroused my will.

I said, "You look familiar."

She had a lovely neck, long and white, a mole marking the spot you'd like to kiss. She tilted her head. Her eyes were green. She had done something complicated and geometric with her eyeliner.

"I'm no one," she answered, a coy smile.

"I'm sure that can't be."

"Well, actually," and now her smile turned lopsided, abashed, "I'm a doctor."

"On TV?"

"Nephrology. IRL." She spoke, it seemed to me, lustily. "Kidneys," she said, and gestured to her own, and never had a more erotic word been uttered.

"You *operate* on people?"

"Sure," she said, took a step closer. "And I do other things too."

My betrothed waited for me.

Don't make me be with Maryanne, I wanted to say. Stop me. Save me! I don't want to meet Maryanne's pastor, I wanted to say, I don't want to hold her hair when she vomits in the parking lot, or to see her discount shampoo on the edge of my bathtub or her cans of chili in my cabinets. Doctor, please. There was that feeling in the air that precedes touch. We looked at each other. The camera held. Do it, I thought. I spoke to her with my mind. Do it.

"Do what?" she said, startling me, for I had spoken aloud, and whether it was fear or love that stopped me, whether it was that low voice in my mind, hold steady, hold steady, I don't know. All I know is that I could not say a word.

• • •

I extricated myself, which I know does not deserve a medal. I know it is disgusting that men want praise for behaving with the barest decency. And yet I *do* want praise. That's what I want. I didn't think I had the strength to turn away. And I knew if I could turn away from this nephrologist, if I could find that in me, then I could really marry Maryanne.

I did. We did. We drank for a few years, together, hard, until she got pregnant, and then, one dawn, with a firm, solemn handshake as between scouts, we quit. Cold turkey, I say proudly. She says nothing about it. And soon the world exploded, a new era announced itself, but by then we were in Nebraska, where nothing changed too much.

• • •

But of course kids are curious. My oldest daughter asked my wife what it had been like. Back then, she meant, during the national darkness. She is interested in chaos and perversion, like all teenagers. She collects the paraphernalia. Did you resist? my daughter wants to know. Did you knit a hat? Did you march?

"No, I didn't," Maryanne says. There is neither pride nor apology in her voice.

The girls are disappointed. They are so civic-minded, this generation, they cannot fathom our inaction. My wife shrugs. She is a hygienist now. She serves another dentist, this one less magnanimous, less glamorous, not yet 35. We invite him to our block parties. We want to set him up with someone.

"I was busy with other things," is all she says.

They are disapproving of her, but my wife doesn't let it get under her skin. She is placid, wears a faint smile. It's me who pushes back. You should be thankful, I tell my daughters, that your mother didn't resist. You wouldn't have made it here, I say to them. You wouldn't exist. A woman like that would never have saved me. ■

"Was it good for you?"

Celebrating 65 Years of

PLAYBOY'S PARTY JOKES

Along with compelling fiction and provocative pictorials, cocktail-hour chuckles stretch all the way back to the magazine's inaugural issue. Here, a six-decade sampling of some of our favorite laughs from the past

JANUARY 1956

The dean of women at an exclusive girls' school was lecturing her students on sexual morality.

"We live today in very difficult times for young people. In moments of temptation," she said, "ask yourself just one question: Is an hour of pleasure worth a lifetime of shame?"

A young woman rose in the back of the room and said, "Excuse me, but how do you make it last an hour?"

MARCH 1957

You've undoubtedly heard about the number of magazines required to fill a baby carriage: a PLAYBOY, a *Mademoiselle,* a few *Liberties* and *Time.*

MARCH 1968

"Hey, man," one hippie said to another, "turn on the radio."

"Okay," the second hippie answered, and then leaning over very close to the radio, he whispered, "I love you."

DECEMBER 1968

A Chicago salesman on a business trip to Boston had a few hours to kill before catching a plane home. Remembering an old friend's advice to try some broiled scrod, a favorite fish in Boston, he hopped into a cab and asked the driver: "Say, do you know where I could get scrod around here?"

"Pal," replied the cabbie, "I've heard that question a thousand times, but this is the first time in the pluperfect subjunctive."

JULY 1979

A story is circulating about the flaky botanical geneticist in southern California who is trying to cross a Mexican jumping bean with a cucumber in order to produce the world's first organic vibrator.

OCTOBER 1989

What does Dan Quayle think *Roe v. Wade* is? Two ways to cross the Potomac.

JUNE 1992

We understand there's a dyslexic rabbi who, when consternated, exclaims, "Yo!"

DECEMBER 1999

Scuttlebutt in D.C. is that Bill Clinton has already written his presidential memoirs. He's calling it *The Johnson Years.*

FEBRUARY 2006

How is poker like sex?

Everyone thinks they are the best, but most people don't know what they are doing.

NOVEMBER 2006

A man walked into a bookstore and asked a saleswoman, "Can you direct me to the self-help section?"

"Sure," she replied, "but wouldn't that defeat the purpose?"

JUNE 2008

"I have to be very careful not to get pregnant," a woman told her friend.

"I don't understand," said the friend. "I thought your husband had a vasectomy."

The woman answered, "Precisely."

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2018

The trouble with political jokes is that they sometimes get elected.

Model Behavior

PHOTOGRAPHY BY

CHRISTOPHER VON STEINBACH

The radiant **Megan Moore** returns to our pages, this time as our February Playmate and to share her views on "fitting in"

Being in the modeling industry has been hard, but it has turned out to be one of the most rewarding things I've ever done. I was 16 when I was scouted by a local agency at the summer fair in Vancouver. Modeling had never, not for a moment, crossed my mind. Honestly, I thought they were making a mistake. At first I resisted, but after they scouted me two more times, I decided to give it a try.

You're already going through self-image issues as a young girl; when your body is naturally curvy and you're told to lose weight, the magnitude is immense. I did juice cleanse after juice cleanse, but nothing stuck. Eventually a "plus-size" agency in New York wanted to sign me. My body type wasn't right for them either. I still booked little jobs here and there. Clients would use to me to model their bras, but they weren't necessarily in love with my actual body—or me, for that matter.

Finally, in 2017, I signed with my first Los Angeles–based agency. We did a test shoot, and when my head shot came out on their website, I saw my appearance had been completely photoshopped. My lips were bigger, my back thinner—everything. When I confronted them, they lied: "We don't know what you're talking about." I dropped them. I said, "I'm sorry. I can't have an agency that doesn't love me for me, so I'm out." It's hard, because aesthetic perfection, which is subjective anyway, is something that's kind of embedded in our brains now. When you see flawless, cellulite-free skin in an image, your reaction is to look at yourself and think, I have to cover this up.

When I found out I was cast in PLAYBOY, I couldn't believe it, because I still wasn't 100 percent confident with my body. This was my turning point. I went into the shoot expecting someone to say, "Her hips are a little too big." Nobody said anything. It was a revelatory moment.

I was always sure of myself as a kid. I never doubted anything about myself. In the industry, that assurance was gradually ripped away from me. I had to relearn how to love myself—and, more important, to love myself no matter what anybody else has to say. I'm grateful, because I couldn't learn this anywhere else. Literally everything related to my appearance was torn down, and I've built myself back up. I'm unbreakable now.

This level of self-love can never be taken away from me. As cheesy as it sounds, it's true and it's powerful. Now the industry is changing in the best way possible. Models are becoming more authentic. All these girls and boys are stepping up and saying, "Hey, this isn't real. *This* is real. This is who I am." And that's beautiful. ■

BIRTHPLACE AND CURRENT CITY: Vancouver, Washington

ON BOUNDARIES

I simultaneously try to keep my personal life private while sharing as much as I can with people on Instagram. Having followers is something that I'm adjusting to. I want to include more than beautiful pictures while maintaining at least *some* of my privacy.

ON SIMPLE PLEASURES

I'm about to sound like such a grandma, but I really just love a good book. And I love to draw. Or I'll sit on the couch, hang out with my dog—a golden retriever named Apollo—and watch some HGTV and be completely happy. Problem is, when people ask you what your idea of fun is and you say, "Watching HGTV," they're like, "All right.... I'm good."

ON COMFORT FOOD

My favorite food is a classic pepperoni pizza. I go to Rally in Vancouver. It's my all-time favorite. I'll order a whole pizza and I can finish the whole thing if I'm feeling it.

ON HAVING A VOICE

Freedom of speech is being threatened at the moment, but social media is shifting things to the point where we can't be ignored. It's an amazing time to have this kind of platform because it might be the only way our voices get through. It's also a portal into the rest of the world for people in small towns—like me.

ON GAMING

I'm really into video games, which people find hard to believe. I had a little brother growing up, and we'd always play Xbox together and I'd just destroy him. It's funny: When I play online, everybody thinks I'm a guy because I have a generic user name. Nobody ever finds out. That's the cool part of it—in the online gaming community nobody assumes you're a girl.

ON ANIMALS

I love orcas, and I am really passionate about getting them out of Sea World. I've watched the documentary *Blackfish* I don't even know how many times—I think more than 16. I feel really strongly about these animals.

ON THE GREAT OUTDOORS

I don't know what it is about being outside and sweating, but I feel sexiest when I've just finished a really tough hike. There's no more empowering feeling than when I have accomplished something that's really hard on my body. It makes me feel like a badass.

ON NEW HORIZONS

I'm trying to explore more of Europe. I want to go to Ireland. There's something about all the lush green hills and centuries-old castles that has me hooked, and I haven't even been there yet.

FEBRUARY 2019 PLAYMATE

FEBRUARY 2019 PLAYMATE

MURDER *They Rapped*

From platinum stars to local heroes, hip-hop artists are seeing their lyrics used against them in criminal trials; here's a look at a problematic and growing trend through the eyes of the accused

BY **JEFF WEISS**

There was no discernible reason for the police to follow Drakeo the Ruler that afternoon. As he later told me, no traffic violations were committed; no weed was smoked. But constitutional questions of rightful search and seizure don't seem to trouble the cops patrolling South Central Los Angeles, and so a brief drive to the liquor store last winter ended with L.A.'s most original rap stylist since Snoop Dogg handcuffed, accused of illegal possession of a firearm and looking on as law enforcement showed him his own videos and rapped his own lyrics at him. Things only got weirder from there.

Over the next several weeks, other members of Drakeo's crew, the Stinc Team, were also arrested. The charges ranged from first-degree murder to commercial burglary, enhanced by the threat of lengthy mandatory sentences due, according to Drakeo, to the district attorney's accusation that the Stinc Team is a gang rather than one of the West Coast's most

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MAURIZIO DI IORIO**

EVIDENCE

Agency:
Item No.: Case No.:
Date of Collection: Time of Collection:
Collected By:
Description of Evidence:
Location of Collection:
Type of Offense:
Victim:
Suspect:

CHAIN OF CUSTODY

Received From: By:
Date: Time:
Received From: By:
Date: Time:
Received From: By:
Date: Time:

NCE

2

3

1

EVIDENCE
TO BE OPENED BY AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

TDK

M.RIOS

popular young hip-hop collectives. As far as evidence goes, his attorney has claimed that the case largely hinges on a jailhouse confession allegedly obtained by an informant. So in an effort to demonize the 25-year-old artist, prosecutors are using Drakeo's music and flashy, carefully cultivated image against him.

"That's bullshit. I can say whatever I want," the rapper born Darrell Caldwell says from inside the Men's Central Jail in downtown Los Angeles. During Drakeo's months of incarceration, the judge has refused to grant him bail. "They're only doing this because I'm a rapper—and a black rapper at that," he says. "I go hard to make sure that you can interpret my music in 20 different ways, but they're still trying to use it to paint a false picture of me."

Since emerging in 2015, Drakeo has developed a diamond-encrusted and cryptic universe with an anxiety-riddled mutation of gangsta rap called "nervous music." His lyrics are full of comic exaggeration and coded lingo in which a single phrase can yield multiple meanings depending on context. In his case, prosecutors have cherry-picked several verses in an attempt to depict him as a menace to society. Before a grand jury indicted him, they listened to 2016's "Bully Breaker," a song full of semi-automatic braggadocio:

You know we keep the bully breaker
Fuck you talking about
Choppa on my waist
Lil nigga ain't finna talk it out
Bully who?
Nah my niggas we finna chalk him out
Disrespect the gang any way
We finna spazz out.

For all the lyrical complexity of Drakeo's catalog, authorities have singled out some of his more boilerplate verses, ones that fit squarely within the 30-year legacy of Los Angeles gangsta rap—which began with Toddy Tee's "Batterram" and Ice-T's "6 'N' the Mornin'," both dueling narratives of the Daryl Gates–era police force breaking down their doors. Nor is Drakeo's lyrical content dissimilar from N.W.A's "Gangsta Gangsta," in which Ice Cube raps, "I got a shotgun / And here's the plot / Takin' niggas out with a flurry of buck shots."

But that was in 1988. The ensuing three decades of new anti-gang laws in California have strengthened prosecutors' ability to brand almost any gathering as a gang. As defined in the California Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act, a "criminal street gang" is "a group of three or more people which: has a common name or identifying sign or symbol." In the hands of prosecutors seeking big-name convictions, this can be used to define just about any street rap crew.

Drakeo's defense attorney, Frank Duncan, considers the case against his client to be flimsy—the result, in part, of earlier burglary charges for which he was never convicted. Drakeo's lyrics focus far more on small-time burglaries than on murder, but prosecutors tend to leap at the opportunity to scare juries with stereotypes of sociopathic gang members.

"It allows them to poison the jury pool and makes it a lot easier to prosecute; everyone immediately dislikes you if they think you're a gang member," Duncan says. "Removed from context, these songs can sound very incriminating. But the reality is that this is L.A. gangsta rap. It has always been about violence and crime."

• • •

The First Amendment's safeguards have historically done little to shield rappers from obscenity charges or character assassination. In 1989, the Detroit police arrested the members of N.W.A after the group played "Fuck Tha Police" in concert despite a warning from law enforcement. The next year, members of 2 Live Crew were arrested at a Broward County nightclub for performing raunchy songs from their album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*. (A jury later acquitted them of obscenity charges.) In 1992, 2Pac was forced to defend himself in a civil suit filed by the family of a murdered Texas state trooper whose killer claimed that the rapper's *2Pacalypse Now* spurred him to commit the crime. No less than Vice President Dan Quayle demanded that Time Warner Inc. yank the album from stores—mirroring what was done earlier that summer to Ice-T, whose song "Cop Killer" had incited a national furor.

During the past decade, this constitutional right to free expression has been called into question for both platinum artists—including Young Thug, accused of playing a role in a 2015 shooting of Lil Wayne's tour bus—and obscure aspirants. And as the 24-7 nature of social media and Instagram Live erases the already blurry line between real life and public persona, police surveillance has only increased, imperiling rappers' ability to satisfy the oft-voyeuristic interest of their fans.

The intractable need for authenticity, the visceral qualities of the art form itself and outright racism have led to rappers' own words being used against them in courts of law. The injustice is specific to the form, even though, in a culture riven by

Drakeo the Ruler, shown here on the outside, was still in custody at press time.

gun violence and blood-soaked mythologies, rappers are merely the latest in a lineage that stretches back to well before Billy the Kid. In some instances, attorneys have argued that the creative fictions of rappers are little different from Johnny Cash's musical boast of shooting a man in Reno just to watch him die. No one arrested Bob Marley for shooting the sheriff. Handcuffs were not slapped on Jim Morrison for the patricide depicted in "The End" (instead, Miami police waited to get him on an obscenity charge).

"The desire of the police to conflate rap groups and gangs is partly ignorance, but there's also something more nefarious at hand," says Andrea Dennis, a professor at the University of Georgia Law School and co-author of the forthcoming book *Rap on Trial*. "California law makes it easy to fit rap groups into the definition of a gang, but calling yourself a gang dates back to the early gang roots of hip-hop, where groups would often call themselves posses, crews or gangs." Dennis continues, "People have gotten familiar with rap; their kids listen to it and it has become more artistic and creative. You might think that would lead to anti-rap sentiment dying down, but it has only intensified. People think they're surrounded by it."

• • •

A similar argument was made by Boosie Badazz (born Torrence Hatch) and his attorneys during his 2012 murder trial. Over the previous decade, the Baton Rouge rapper had burnished his legend as the 2Pac of the 21st century South. A brazen and raw artist raised on the impoverished South Side, Boosie released his rap titled "Fuck the Police" in 2007, and that version became part of the protests that sprang up along with the Black Lives Matter movement. Unsurprisingly, it did little to endear him to law enforcement.

According to the Baton Rouge district attorney's office, Boosie paid a teenage hitman, Michael "Marlo Mike" Louding, to murder the brother of his baby's mother. The authorities successfully petitioned the judge to admit as evidence several songs they claimed had been recorded the night of the killing.

In front of the jury, lead prosecutor Dana Cummings played a cappella versions of two compositions. She cited this passage from "187" as one of the most damning:

Yo Marlo, he got a Monte Carlo
That bitch grey
I want that bitch dead today

Defense attorneys successfully argued that none of the lyrics conclusively tied Boosie to the slaying. Although Boosie used the name of the alleged murderer, his lawyers said the dead man didn't drive a Monte Carlo—a reminder that art often borrows from real life and even autobiographies may create composite characters, compress time sequences and generally exercise creative license for the sake of the story.

Prosecutors often counter that presenting lyrics can be essential to proving motive, intent, identity and absence of mistake. Yet in Boosie's case, the jury—intimating they agreed with the defense's position that his songs were merely reflections of the hyper-violence of Baton Rouge, a city with a murder rate that eclipsed Chicago's in 2017—unanimously voted for acquittal.

• • •

The problem is more pressing than just celebrity cases. According to Dennis, several hundred similar cases exist outside the limelight. Arguably the most extreme example of prosecutorial overreach is that of San Diego rapper Tiny Doo (a.k.a. Brandon Duncan), who served seven months in prison for a crime that, in a sense, no one even accused him of committing. It concerned his 2014 mixtape *No Safety,* which a district attorney's office seized upon to test a rarely used California law that says anyone who actively participates in a criminal street gang and "who willfully promotes, furthers, assists or benefits from any felonious criminal conduct by members of that gang" can be found guilty of conspiracy to commit that felony.

The case involved a string of shootings that prosecutors claimed were the work of San Diego's Lincoln Park Bloods. Brandon Duncan had once been affiliated with the gang, but at the time of the crimes he was working a full-time job laying tile. By citing a relatively little-heard album with a cover photo of a pistol with the safety off, prosecutors claimed he was promoting the gang and therefore culpable of any act of wrongdoing any other member of the gang may have committed. It was only after seven months in prison and significant media scrutiny that a Superior Court judge ruled that Duncan was being wrongly prosecuted.

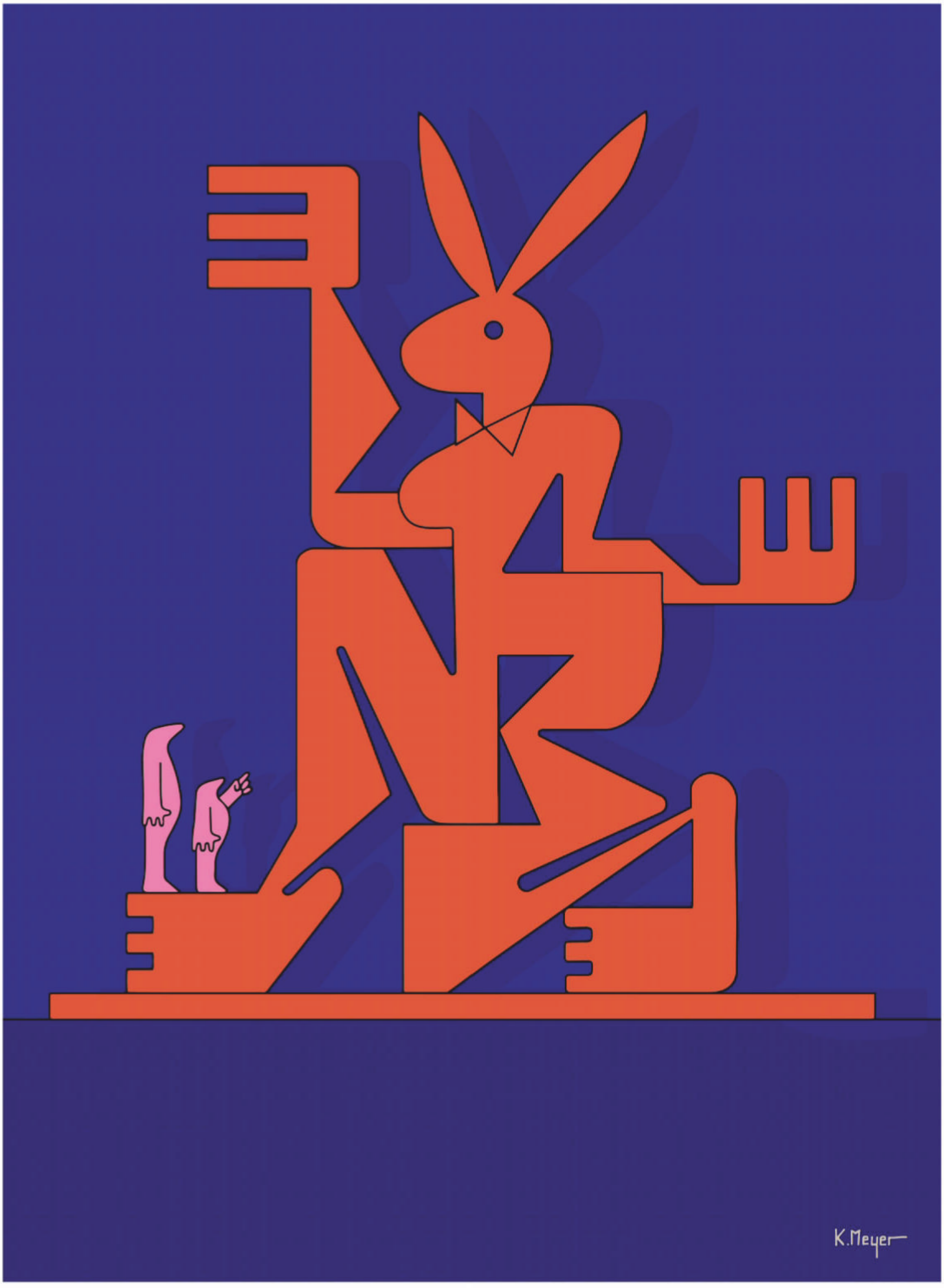
"There are black kids serving 25 years to life for lyrics that they've written," says Duncan, who is currently suing the San Diego Police Department and two of its detectives for violating his First Amendment rights and for unlawful search and seizure. "People think that everything we're speaking about is real, and they're completely taking the entertainment value out of it. Sometimes it's based off real situations, but sometimes it might be about something that happened to someone I know. We're just trying to paint an accurate picture of the urban landscape."

Nonetheless, the war between rap and the fundamental right to free speech figures to intensify in the coming years. Prosecutors and lawmakers are considering something called "true threat," a type of communication for which artists can be incarcerated simply for lyrically threatening a rival. And the explosion of social media has only made it easier for law enforcement to track every move of the rap community.

"THEY'RE ONLY DOING THIS BECAUSE I'M A RAPPER—AND A BLACK RAPPER AT THAT."

According to Erik Nielson, a professor at the University of Richmond and co-author of *Rap on Trial,* the head of the police gang unit in Newport News, Virginia told him that his officers spend half their time monitoring gangs (and presumably local rappers) online.

"It feels Orwellian, but just as scary as that is the sheer incompetence of people performing these Orwellian functions," Nielson says. "These people have no idea what they're talking about. And it's only going to get worse. Social media offers both a low barrier to entry and the opportunity to get famous without a record label. These artists might write sophisticated raps, but their business acumen and awareness about these issues might not be on par. And the police are watching their every step." ■


K.Meyer

THE PLAYBOY SYMPOSIUM

A collection of provocative pieces that probe the inner workings and outer limits of freedom of expression

Allow us to introduce a new series: a loosely themed collection of essays and reported pieces chosen by our editors with an eye toward covering a lot of ground in a few pages, provoking debate among our readers and allowing ostensibly separate issues to intersect one another. (To the dedicated PLAYBOY reader, it's something like a cross between *Forum* and the *Playboy Panel* series, with the odd satire piece thrown in.) What does religious liberty have to do with freedom of speech on college campuses? How can social media be equally effective for glossy brands and doomsday militias? It's our hope that the following pages will inspire you to consider these questions and America's changing relationship with the First Amendment. So come to the table; we're waiting.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **SARAH MAXWELL**

FICTION, FACTS AND FEMA CAMPS

Social media has proven that even the most outlandish conspiracy theories are impervious to reality.
***Leah Sottile** questions whose job it is to make sure they don't turn violent*

Back in 2015 I was working on a story about preppers—the folks who stockpile doomsday essentials such as canned food, water, guns and gold—and I talked to a woman who ran a store that sold supplies one might need at the end of the world.

"America is under a judgment from God," she told me. "My belief is we're going to go to bed one Friday night and wake up Saturday morning, and we're going to be in a bank holiday. And when the banks open a week later, the dollar will be devalued by 50 percent. It's set up like a house of cards—and when it comes down, it's going to come down all at once."

She explained that Americans would be rounded up and taken to massive concentration camps that the Federal Emergency Management Agency had been building all around the country. In fact, there was one right by my house in Spokane, Washington, at the county fairgrounds. Her proof? "The fencing at the fairground now leans in," she said. "It's to keep people in."

It was the first time I'd ever heard such a thing—the idea that the top section of a fence would turn its barbed-wire face inward to prevent those within its bounds from escaping—and I drove directly to the fairgrounds, made two quick loops around and saw that, no, the fences did not demonstrate any sort of inward lean. I didn't have the heart to call her back and tell her.

Mark Pitcavage, a senior research fellow at the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism, says the theory that Americans are being forced into government camps is a foundational tale of the militia movement. It's part of the broader idea that "the whole rest of the world has been taken over by a globalist, socialist, tyrannical government that they describe as the New World Order," Pitcavage says. "The United States is the last bastion of freedom." For now.

Pitcavage read about the FEMA camps in a pamphlet as early as 1994. Around 2008 he noticed a resurgence of interest in militias and the FEMA camp theory.

"This is the time when social media really takes over the internet," he says. Just like everyone else, the members of the militia movement flocked to the new platforms. "The internet allows things to spread very far, very fast," Pitcavage adds. "It also allows many more people to accidentally come across a conspiracy theory." Once restricted to paper flyers and dubbed VHS tapes, the FEMA theory was suddenly virtually boundless. And though the delivery method might have changed, the verbiage hadn't.

"I found that fascinating," Pitcavage says. "If this started in 1994, how could all these alleged hundreds of concentration camps not have been exposed over the following 15 years?"

He tells me it probably wouldn't have mattered if I had informed the prepper lady that the tops of the fences at the fairgrounds weren't actually leaning inward. Local militias often "investigate" suspected FEMA camps and other hot spots, reporting their findings to their followers. Last summer, after a leader of a local vigilante group claimed he had discovered evidence of a "sex camp" that victimized children in Tucson, militias including the Three Percenters allegedly planned to drive there from all over the country to look into it. Along with local police, the group found it was, in fact, an abandoned homeless encampment. But even that didn't dissuade those who wanted to believe.

That's common, Pitcavage says. Investigations often prompt conspiracy theorists simply to look elsewhere for evidence. "They set up an almost impossibly high bar of proof," he says.

So where does it all lead? Obviously the government's not going to cop to building FEMA camps, offering a sheepish Walter White–style "You got us!" Nor can the theory be curbed legally—and Mike Wood, a lecturer in psychology at the University of Winchester, argues that we shouldn't want that. It's not a bad thing for a citizenry to be skeptical of its government. It's when those theories turn violent—such as when a man brought a gun into a Washington, D.C.–area pizza joint because he believed it to be the center of a Hillary Clinton–supported pedophile ring—that they become an issue. At that point, when theories devolve into threats, social media platforms have the power to act. Last August, loads of content from conspiracy-theory godfather Alex Jones was banned from YouTube and several other platforms for violating rules about hate speech and bullying. Perhaps his most virulent—and viral—theory questioned the very reality of the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, which led to endless harassment of the victims' parents.

"As private companies, Apple, Facebook and Spotify can decide what content appears on their platforms," Lata Nott, executive director of the First Amendment Center at the Freedom Forum Institute in Washington, D.C., told *USA Today* after the ban. Despite the earth-spanning influence of social media, it isn't the public sphere—and the First Amendment (theoretically, anyway) rules only over the latter.

But even forced off the internet, conspiracy theories can be impervious to evidence thanks to their own logical loophole. Rob Brotherton, author of the 2015 book *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories,* tells me, "I'd go so far as to say that, logically, it's impossible to disprove a conspiracy theory. They are inherently about secret knowledge. If the conspiracy was real, and if it was as good as the conspiracy theorists think it is, then of course there would be no definitive proof—that just means the conspiracy is working."

So when someone like Jones is banned, or when fake news is removed from Facebook, it's all too easy to say, "Of *course* they took it down. They know we're right." Social media allows the proliferation of good ideas and totally harebrained ones alike. But it's belief, especially in our digital cacophony, that's ultimately more powerful than truth.

Leah Sottile is a Portland, Oregon–based writer and host of the Bundyville podcast.

THE OTHER CAMPUS CRISIS

Conservatives argue that liberal students are stifling their right to speak at colleges and universities. But is it all an act? ***Caroline Orr*** *investigates*

If you were to listen solely to Tucker Carlson or Laura Ingraham, you might be inclined to believe America's educational institutions are in the grip of a full-blown free-speech crisis. The refrain is familiar: Colleges, once hailed as bastions of free expression and open debate, are devolving into insular safe spaces where liberal professors coddle students with trigger warnings as right-of-center speakers are chased off campus by hordes of intolerant, indoctrinated snowflakes. Recent studies, however, suggest otherwise. Of note, a 2016 Knight Foundation survey found college students who support speech restrictions on campus are outnumbered more than two to one by those who don't.

That said, a threat to the free expression of ideas at colleges and universities is looming, but it isn't coming from students, professors or leftist indoctrination. It's coming from organizations that fund a so-called "free speech" movement that aims to exploit on-campus confrontations for political gain. With campuses doubling as breeding grounds for the next generation of political leaders, a network of right-wing groups has ramped up their targeting of these institutions to further sow national discord and inject conservative ideology into student groups and campus culture. At the same time, they support legislation that shuts down any pushback.

One of the most prominent players is Young America's Foundation, which spent more than $8 million on campus events in 2015. Described as a "conservative youth organization" that seeks to "restore sanity" on college campuses, YAF has been a fixture of the mainstream conservative movement for nearly half a century. Author Ann Coulter, White House senior policy advisor Stephen Miller and National Rifle Association senior advisor Chuck Cunningham are all part of the YAF network.

Between 2005 and 2015, YAF spent more than $50 million on campus speaking events. In 2016 the group funded 111 speakers on 77 campuses nationwide. As it operates nationally, YAF has made a name for itself by deploying controversial public figures—from anti-Islam hard-liners such as Robert Spencer, Pamela Geller and David Horowitz to mainstream conservative figures such as Ben Shapiro and Rick Santorum—to speak on liberal campuses, knowing it could provoke a backlash that can later be exploited as "proof" of a free-speech crisis.

In addition to paying for speakers, YAF coordinates with campus organizations to host "free speech" events and sponsor "boot camps" where students are taught to confront liberal classmates and professors with aggressive tactics. These activities earned at least one university-based YAF chapter, at Michigan State University, the official designation of a hate group—the only student hate group in the country. The chapter was designated as such for hosting white-supremacist speakers, organizing a "Koran desecration contest" and creating "Catch an Illegal Alien Day."

While YAF may be the most well funded and deeply connected of the conservative groups participating in the campus free-speech wars, it isn't the only one. The Leadership Institute positions itself as an activism-centered group that trains foot soldiers, or Campus Correspondents. The organization is linked to James O'Keefe's Project Veritas, which tried to discredit sexual-harassment allegations against Alabama Senate candidate Roy Moore in 2017 by providing false testimony to *The Washington Post*. According to a letter penned by O'Keefe requesting donations, the Leadership Institute's Campus Correspondents are "freedom fighters" tasked with learning "how to defeat the radical left." They seek to "bring down professors and school officials," "stop the advance" of "dangerous leftism dead in its tracks" and "fight back against" the "growing insanity" of liberalism on campus "before it destroys our country." The institute also runs the Campus Reform project, which calls itself a "watchdog to the nation's higher education system" focused on "expos[ing] bias and abuse on the nation's college campuses." On its website, Campus Reform enthusiastically recruits students to join it in fighting back against the "evil empire" of leftism in higher education.

Turning Point USA, which brands itself as a "24/7-365 activist organization," is another key player in the battle to redefine free speech on campus. The group, led by communications director Candace Owens, has been accused of organizing staged confrontations. It has launched Professor Watchlist, a database of professors tracked for their supposed liberal or leftist ideologies. Professors have reportedly faced harassment, threats and calls for their dismissal after being added to the list.

In a cynical twist, the same conservative donors backing these organizations are also pouring money into efforts to stifle campus dissent, with such investments already paying off in the form of draconian anti-free-speech legislation. In the first few months of 2017 alone, Republican lawmakers in at least eight states introduced so-called campus free-speech bills that prohibit students from engaging in protest in a way that "disrupts" the speech of anyone who has been invited to speak on campus. By March 2018, similar bills had been introduced in at least 16 states, half of which have already passed. In total, 25 states have introduced legislation purporting to protect free speech on campus by cracking down on student protests, encouraging harsh punishment for banned categories of protest and mandating how universities deal with issues related to hate speech and harassment.

Many of these states have passed legislation based on a model bill, the Campus Free Speech Act, designed by the Goldwater Institute. The organization is bankrolled by the Koch brothers and the Mercer family, two of the country's most prominent megadonors, and the legislation's implications are chilling. In states where the model bill is passed, colleges can impose academic and legal sanctions on student protesters for "shouting down" a speaker or engaging in other expressive acts, including chanting and singing, during demonstrations. In Wisconsin, which passed a particularly harsh version of the bill, students who are found to have disrupted the free expression of another person (including non-members of the university) can be expelled after a third strike. The model legislation also seeks to effectively force universities to allow any and all speakers on campus and prevent administrators from disinviting speakers.

Under the guise of free speech, conservative donors are pumping millions into an orchestrated effort to force their political agenda onto college campuses. And when they run into pushback, they cynically accuse their critics of censorship and cite it as evidence of a free-speech "crisis." In fact, it exists only because they manufactured it. So yes, free speech on campus is facing a reckoning. But as with all things political, one need only follow the money to find the real threat.

Caroline Orr is a behavioral scientist and an editor at Shareblue Media, a progressive news outlet.

IN BAD FAITH

Christopher Stroop *points out some unseemly similarities in the weaponization of the First Amendment when it comes to religious liberty and free speech*

The theocratic Christian right, alongside fringe alt-right voters, is at the core of the success of President Donald Trump, whose presidency has been marked by GOP-enabled disinformation campaigns and a brazen disregard for democracy. In the 2016 presidential election, 81 percent of white evangelicals voted for Trump. That may be why the MAGA crowd seems to weaponize bad-faith arguments for religious liberty as often as it does for free speech, with the ultimate goal of restricting the freedom of others. How do we counter dishonest appeals to democratic values?

In the first volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies,* published in 1945, the Austrian-born British philosopher Karl Popper warns that "in order to maintain a tolerant society, the society must be intolerant of intolerance." In his seminal 1971 *A Theory of Justice,* however, American political philosopher John Rawls argues that those committed to justice should extend tolerance to "intolerant sects." Yet even Rawls concedes there should be limits "when the tolerant sincerely and with reason believe that their institutions of liberty are in danger."

According to Frederick Clarkson, a senior research analyst at the think tank Political Research Associates, "the demagogic statements by President Trump and his allies who call the media the 'enemy of the people' are the most serious threats to free speech" in our current political environment. Melissa Hooper, a director at the nonpartisan organization Human Rights First, similarly argues that we should be concerned that "leaders like the president and other influential figures are confusing facts they don't like with false information."

People who are quick to decry what they perceive to be restrictions on their speech tend to use rhetorical strategies similar to those who decry encroachments on religious liberty. The former conflate First Amendment rights with unregulated access to prestigious platforms, as demonstrated by the brouhaha surrounding Milo Yiannopoulos's canceled appearance at the University of California, Berkeley in 2017, *The New York Times*'s 2018 firing of Quinn Norton based on her ties to white supremacist Andrew Auernheimer, and *The Atlantic*'s termination of Kevin Williamson for a 2014 podcast in which he expressed support for hanging women who've had abortions.

Williamson's statement—and his subsequent firing—neatly illustrates how the battle over "religious freedom" waged by the Christian right (which may finally achieve its goal of overturning *Roe v. Wade* now that Brett Kavanaugh is on the Supreme Court) intersects with bad-faith arguments about freedom of speech. This is ironic, given that evangelical colleges such as Pennsylvania's Grove City College and Kentucky's Asbury University invoke "religious liberty" to justify their censorship of student newspapers and suppression of support for LGBTQ rights. For all the concern in our public sphere over liberal students and college administrations supposedly rejecting free speech, this serious campus free-speech crisis remains little-known.

When it comes to abortion, Clarkson notes that religious-liberty rhetoric has already trumped freedom of speech in some jurisdictions. "There are laws in many states that require health care workers to read scripted statements to patients with misleading claims that abortion would increase their risk of breast cancer and suicide," he says. "Government-mandated false scripts are not only a violation of the free speech of health workers but a violation of a patient's right to receive unbiased medical information."

Just as he sees "the best answer to disagreeable speech" as "more speech," Clarkson believes we must embrace a robust concept of religious freedom in order to counter the Christian right's attempts to claim it as justification for censorship and discrimination. He notes that in the case of marriage equality, "many Christians, Christian institutions and non-Christians honor the love of same-sex couples." In other words, religious liberty should not preference anti-LGBTQ religion over affirming religion.

"Bad-faith arguments with respect to freedom of religion often fail to account for the fact that the argument denies the rights of another person," Hooper says. Given that the rise of American authoritarianism is occurring in an era of bots, trolls and social media manipulation, it will take more than more speech and the embrace of pluralism to restore civil society. Clarkson prescribes deeper involvement in electoral politics and a renewed emphasis on the practice of democratic citizenship. Hooper agrees, suggesting that to counter disinformation, we need to focus on teaching civics and media literacy.

The first step is admitting we have a problem. Living with authoritarian-identifying leaders in power is like being in an abusive relationship: We're subjected to continual gaslighting. If we want to preserve democracy, we must recognize that not all arguments that invoke democratic values aim to protect all citizens.

Christopher Stroop is a senior researcher with the University of Innsbruck's Postsecular Conflicts Project.

SCIENCE SAYS

Debra W. Soh *asks, What happens when social justice warriors reject scientific data?*

In the discipline of sexology, the study of gender dysphoria, or when one's gender identity doesn't match their birth sex, has become a controversial area of research. Consider the backlash last August when *PLOS ONE,* a peer-reviewed scientific journal, published the first study to examine rapid-onset gender dysphoria, or ROGD, a phenomenon the study claims is growing among adolescents who come out as transgender. This coming out, as described by the study's author, Dr. Lisa Littman, "seemed to occur in the context of belonging to a peer group where one, multiple, or even all of the friends have become gender dysphoric and transgender-identified during the same timeframe." Littman, a physician and assistant professor at Brown University, conducted the online study, a 90-question survey of 256 parents, and concluded that ROGD may be an effect of "social contagion," or "the spread of affect or behaviors through a population."

The study ignited the internet almost immediately after publication, with some left-leaning media outlets calling it everything from "junk" to "anti-trans." Think Progress's LGBTQ editor, Zack Ford, wrote, "All she did was anonymously survey parents from the exact same anti-trans online parent groups that invented the concept, codifying their totally bogus myth in the guise of a scientific study."

Instead of defending Littman's research, Brown University rescinded its corresponding

press release five days after publication, which happened to be the same day *PLOS ONE* announced it would review the article to seek "further expert assessment on the study's methodology and analyses." Bess Marcus, dean of Brown's School of Public Health, said "removing the article from news distribution is the most responsible course of action."

Speaking as a former sexual neuroscientist, it has been my experience that those who point out the existence of ROGD are often labeled transphobic, whether they're researchers, journalists or parents. Regarding Littman's study, it's disturbing that opponents criticized the sample group—parents of transgender teens who answered the survey on one of three selected websites—because they obviously hadn't read the research. Of note, roughly 86 percent of the parents endorsed gay marriage and 88 percent stated transgender people deserve equal rights and protections. About 60 percent of parents reported their children had at least one mental health disorder, such as anxiety or autism, prior to announcing they were transgender. Many reported a history of trauma or self-harm. Most important, none of the children met the diagnostic criteria for gender dysphoria in childhood as defined by psychiatry's *DSM-5* guidelines.

In addition, many parents reported their kids came out after spending vast amounts of time online, including watching transition videos on YouTube. For about 37 percent of parents who reported about friends, more than half of their kids' friend groups had also come out as transgender. This is more than 70 times the prevalence of transgender people in the general population. The study also showed how young people might receive social benefits for identifying as trans, such as increased popularity among peers and greater protection by teachers. Some of the websites accessed by young people even provided instructions on getting approved for hormone therapy.

Opponents of the study argued that trans people weren't consulted as part of the research. This complaint is naive. The role of a scientist is to be objective, and a well-designed study—along with institutional review boards that ensure research is executed ethically—operates with this in mind. Whether or not scientists consult with or identify as part of the population they are studying is irrelevant.

Littman agrees that more research on ROGD is required but stands by her findings. So do many academics, stemming from the fact that it's rare for an academic journal to place an already published scientific paper under review, considering its methodology has already been vetted during the peer-review process.

I worry that, given the negative press—*Slate* wrote that Littman's "anti-trans study mischaracterized a real condition," for example—*PLOS ONE* was influenced by a fear that the findings were politically incorrect. For one, public capitulation only promotes the idea that ROGD is a made-up condition fabricated by bigots to invalidate transgender people. Secondly, reconsidering the methodology of a peer-reviewed study after publication isn't just a question of academic rigor; it can amount to censorship of findings.

I don't deny that the transgender community has faced discrimination and hardship. Although transitioning can be beneficial for some adults, the same cannot always be said for children. Based on my experience, in the case of ROGD in particular, a girl's proclamation of gender dysphoria commonly has nothing to do with gender. There are a host of reasons why a young woman may feel discomfort around being female; they don't necessarily mean she's gender dysphoric.

The way the chips have fallen around Littman's study could set a precedent and broadcast a wider message that academic journals can be swayed if a particular group deems an article's findings unpalatable. In a time when the president's administration is attempting to ignore the research of climate scientists, we must also protect science that—while not immediately comfortable—can lead to a better understanding of the human condition.

Debra W. Soh holds a Ph.D. in sexual neuroscience research from York University and writes about the science and politics of sex.

I JUST LOVE CONTENT!

An unabashed and totally not satirical valentine from ***Scott Dikkers,*** *founder of The Onion*

Hello—you've just met the biggest fan of content ever! I love consuming content from a variety of content-delivery mediums. I love written content; that one's my favorite, probably. But I also like video content. Podcast content too. I can't decide! As long as it's an effective content strategy, I'm hooked!

I really love content that interacts meaningfully with my demographic group—when relevant content takes me on an emotional journey, starting with increased brand awareness and culminating in a positive end-user experience that leaves someone statistically similar to my age, race, sex, income level, years of college education and credit card ownership with a rich, satisfied feeling of elevated brand interest. I want a brand interaction I'll never forget!

The other day I saw this amazing content in my feed. It beautifully took up the space between the advertorials and pop-ups and commercial messages. It might have been integrated branded content, or maybe it was a celebrity-endorsed sponsored post. Whatever it was, it was awesome, because content is just the best!

I recently read this piece in the opinion-mercial section of the newspaper. Talk about a high content-differentiation factor! This was content guaranteed to have excellent ROI for the marketing professional who served it. I was impressed! I always make it a point to contribute to good open rates and click-throughs. I just want to give a little back to the content I love so much!

On a more serious note, content doesn't just infotain me; it keeps me up to date on the issues I care about. I follow important events like politics. My content platforms know all my opinion data and send me the best content tailored to what I think, which means it's true!

Did I tell you I have a poster of content in my bedroom? I love going to sleep looking at content on my wall!

Oddly, I never dream. My nights are just a dark abyss with no content.

We're living in the Golden Age of content. Nowadays, there's so much content on cable TV and in theaters and on all those great OTT platforms—I can't possibly consume it all, but I wish I could! Maybe someday the content creators will figure out a way to inject content directly into my mind. Then I won't have to think at all! My most basic responses to sensory input will be replaced with content notifications. Wouldn't that be amazing? *Ding!* Time for content!

However, as a responsible consumer of content, I believe it's important to protect my content from hackers. If they invent that content-plugged-into-your-brain thing I mentioned, I would hate to have my brain hacked! Then people could make me believe anything they wanted, and that would be terrible!

At least now I control my own thoughts. And you know what I'm thinking? I just love content!

Scott Dikkers's books Outrageous Marketing: The Story of The Onion and How to Build a Powerful Brand With No Marketing Budget and Welcome to the Future Which Is Mine are out now.

Ezra Miller

The game-changing star of two Hollywood franchises helps redefine masculinity with his totally expressive, completely liberating style—Bunny ears and all

TEXT BY
RYAN GAJEWSKI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
RYAN PFLUGER

STYLING BY
RYAN YOUNG

"It's funny when an interview starts and you suddenly realize you're talking about stuff you've never talked about with anyone," Ezra Miller tells me. The Hollywood It boy, who lately has been busy blurring the boundaries of masculinity in men's magazines (including this one) with his enthusiasm for gender-bending, has just shared with me his first-ever sex dream, a memory from the age of four of a witch imprisoning him on a waterspout. "It was tantalizing and delightful," he says. He points out how appropriate that dream now is, given his role as Credence Barebone in the bankable *Fantastic Beasts* films, a big-budget franchise that is certainly cinema's witchiest and also its queerest, thanks to its buzzy exploration of two wizards' gay romance.

The 26-year-old New Jersey–born actor and musician, who earned his cred in 2011's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and has since graduated to blockbuster top billings, also playing the Flash in DC's big-screen universe, says that being in PLAYBOY has been his "dream for a while now." (To be frank, it has also been our hope to feature more men who are comfortable posing the question, What does the future of masculinity look like?) His comment about stumbling into deep personal revelations pertains to almost everything we discuss after his PLAYBOY shoot, in which he flaunts Bunny ears, fishnets and size-14 heels. This includes: his crush on a boy in kindergarten that led him to ask his older sisters if he was gay; his painful adolescence due to "weird bones" in his arm, chest and neck that still cause soreness, and a childhood stutter that he conquered through singing; and his companionship with a group of sexual partners he calls his polycule—a portmanteau of "polyamorous molecule."

Highly spiritual, energetic and loquacious, Miller delivers these stories with nods to history, philosophy and political theory. He's attracted to men and women, he says, and is a "sexual being," though the roles of love and sex in his life can vary. It would be reckless to suggest his career hasn't impacted those realms. "I've been attacked by fucking bigots," he says. "And then in the industry? Of course I've been in auditions where sexuality was being leveraged. It's important to acknowledge the diversity of voices who have experienced this shit. Everyone is victim to it. Everyone is a survivor of it."

As he enters a new phase, one in which some of this country's most masculine magazines are inviting him to become the face of the new normal, and when a children's tale about wizardry embraces homosexuality, Miller's queerness seems to balance him—as does his drive. "I'm trying to find queer beings who understand me as a queer being off the bat, who I make almost a familial connection with and feel I've been married to 25 lifetimes ago from the moment we meet," he explains. Tearing up, he adds, "If I didn't have art, I'd be so fucking dead, so long ago. I probably would have done it myself. Art—that's all I know." ■

SUIT AND SHIRT BY PAUL SMITH

SUIT AND SHIRT BY PAUL SMITH; VELVET DRESS BY FRAME; EARRINGS BY BELADORA; CUSTOM BUNNY EARS BY CAROL AI; TIGHTS BY FALKE

JACKET AND SHIRT FROM SAINT LAURENT BY ANTHONY VACCARELLO; RING BY ALAN CROCETTI

DRESS BY OFF-WHITE C/O VIRGIL ABLOH; BODYSUIT BY KIKI DE MONTPARNASSE; CUSTOM BUNNY EARS BY CAROL AI

a·/new/

Sofia Barrett-Ibarria

Megan Stubbs

Taylor Ferber

Bruna Nessif

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **NATASHA WILSON**

/wāve/

Does nudity discredit intellect? That's the question six female writers of various backgrounds wanted to present in our pages when they approached PLAYBOY last fall. It's a question that illuminates how views on feminism continue to shift post-#MeToo: what it looks like, who can participate, the greater purpose. In think pieces, academic discussions, podcasts and tweets, society is still contending with women who reject the notion that sexual expression and success must be mutually exclusive. In a time when conversations about sex are increasingly politicized, these journalists, columnists and authors are uniting to speak out on what it means to be simultaneously autonomous, successful, proud and powerful. In a word, free.

TAYLOR FERBER, CELEBRITY WHISPERER

From a young age, fascinated by the human psyche and the ability to reach the masses with my words, I dreamed of becoming a reporter. Today, I am one. I visit movie sets around the world, report from the most glamorous red carpets and interview celebrities such as Timothée Chalamet, Gal Gadot and Oprah. My site, Talk to Me Taylor, is a place where I challenge celebrities with unconventional interviews that attempt to go deeper and pull out something more meaningful.

Here's the thing about being a reporter: People like to tell you what to ask and how to do your job. Ironic, given journalists are supposed to be protectors of free speech, right? VH1 once "suspended" me for being critical of a celebrity in an article. My words have been stifled by publications that claim to be progressive and feminist but are intolerant of views outside their editors' comfort zones. Last year, The Blast, in a piece called "Morgan Freeman Openly Objectifies Female Reporter During Press Interview," attempted to portray me as another #MeToo victim. The story was widely reported, but Freeman, though accused of harassment by other women, didn't make me feel uncomfortable during our interview. I published an op-ed piece denouncing the article.

And so, throughout my career I've adopted one consistent message: Don't tell me what I can and can't say. In this era, too many people are torn down, devalued and ruined for saying something others don't agree with. People attempt to silence one another under the belief that opposing views don't deserve equal consideration. Many probably perceive this very story as something female journalists shouldn't do lest we risk our reputations, our professionalism.

Yes, we're showcasing our bodies and inviting you to look. No, none of that discredits our intellect, womanhood, integrity or ability to tell a story. I can no longer feed into a narrative that says displaying one's beauty, brains and body are mutually exclusive. There's nothing wrong with aspiring to be a Centerfold or a woman who can bring a story to life with pen and paper. They're different forms of creative expression. A woman's ability to exhibit either form, or both, without judgment? That's freedom.

I hope you see in these photos the beautiful female form in all its glory. Go ahead, call these women sexy. When you do, remember we are all writers, journalists and thinkers helping to shape the world you live in via what you read, armed with nothing more than our intelligence and an unapologetic love for words.

Taylor Ferber writes about pop culture and entertainment, with bylines on Vulture, Bustle, UsMagazine.com and Fandango.

MEGAN STUBBS, MASTER OF SEX

I'll go out on a limb and say sexologist wasn't a job anyone considered on career day in high school. Incidentally, that is what I've become.

After years of study and obtaining certificates and degrees, I now have the privilege to educate people about sex every day. I'd even argue I know enough to be dangerous.

I'm sure you've seen my breasts by now. If not, take another look above—I'm standing there, in the middle, holding the handbag. Nice, right? Has your opinion of me changed now that you've seen my breasts? Unfortunately for some of you, it may have.

Such judgment originates with critics who don't want to live in a world where women have nipples and own their bodies. Despite my authority on the topic, this story may reduce me in some people's minds to nothing more than another woman who got naked for attention. In fact, I'm honored to be featured in PLAYBOY for both my words and my flesh. To be part of this iconic brand, and to have the reach of its platform for sharing my ideas, is truly amazing and affirming.

In a society starved for honest, accurate information about sex, sexuality, relationships and body image, it is my mission to provide a fresh lens through my reporting. Shining a light on complicated topics such as the increase in male infertility and rising male interest in anal sex, being mindful of inclusion and bringing a sensitivity to ethnic diversity rooted in my own complex heritage are at the forefront of my work as a sex educator turned journalist. It's wrong to relate my comfort with baring my flesh—no, *owning* it—to my intellectual worth.

As feminists, it's our right to determine what empowers us. For some, that may be modesty; for others, it may be nudity. Neither is right or wrong. It's about individuality. If the thought of seeing someone nude diminishes your opinion of his or her worth or authority, I'd encourage you to ask yourself why.

Even with all this said, some will be displeased with me. That's okay. I'm not here to make you happy. I'm not a problem.

Megan Stubbs is a board-certified sexologist and public speaker who writes about sex and relationships for Playboy.com.

HELEN DONAHUE, FEMINIST FIREBRAND

In late 2017, I became a pivotal voice in the #MeToo movement within the journalism community. At the time, my parents warned me that if I leaned too hard into activism against domestic violence, it might become expected of me; it might become what I was known for in the industry. I fell into a yearlong depression, struggling to comprehend my new reputation as the girl who got raped and decided to speak up about it. I hated being lauded for my bravery. Coming forward was simply the right thing to do, and I happened to have the platform and the freedom to do it. Not all women do.

Most men, I believe, imagine that feminism imbues every fiber of a woman's existence. Those men don't understand feminism. It is equality and freedom, but it also allows for imperfection—the ability to be flawed, both clothed and unclothed. I'm now attempting, through my writing, to make feminism more accessible to a Gen Z audience that may be alienated by modern media's lack of consideration for them. It is important to tell young women today that being a feminist doesn't mean blindly voting for any woman who runs for Congress. Or any woman who runs for president.

Coming into 2019 I'm no longer accepting the role that has tried to confine me since 2017. I have too many components, too many contradictions and complexities. In my teens and early 20s, I struggled with my mental health. At one point I was simultaneously a postgrad academic and a stripper. Today, I'm a writer who has the freedom to publish my thoughts even though my editors know they'll trigger a backlash. No one will ever be able to identify me as this or that.

Knowing myself, I'll continue to enrage and surprise people. I'll continue to bring attention to wrongdoing, especially when minorities' rights are threatened. I've abandoned much of the terminology that compromised the 2016 election—SJWisms such as *smash the patriarchy*—to speak directly to young people, who I hope read my op-ed pieces without pigeonholing them as feminist arguments. We need to let the next generation know that women (and men) are not just falling in line. We'll speak up, write and report whenever we detect fissures in particular arguments. I want people to see that feminists can be intelligent and not take everything seriously—but take the *correct* things seriously. We can also choose to be naked. That's the beauty of it.

Helen Donahue has written for Vice and Quartz and is a contributing writer for Playboy.com. She previously served as Super Deluxe's social media director and as an editor for Hearst Digital Media.

ANDREA WERHUN, MODERN WHORE

Why, hello there. Welcome to my naked body. Greetings from the lovely lady lumps of this fertile flesh, presented to you without shame in unabashed two-dimensional Technicolor. Groovy. Although "assume" makes an ass of you and me, you may have guessed that I made a choice to show you the truth of these curves—and you, my friend, would be correct. I mean, why wouldn't I? Look at my tits! Here today, at my bellybutton tomorrow. I might as well immortalize my sexual apex with a tasteful PLAYBOY spread alongside a gaggle of incredible women.

Like the other women featured in these pages, I'm a writer. My book, *Modern Whore: A Memoir,* published in 2017, is about the two glamorous and grotesque years I spent working as an escort in Toronto. It features 27 short stories that run the gamut from funny and thoughtful to erotic and disturbing, sprinkled with some 60 (mostly nude) film stills of yours truly taken by filmmaker Nicole Bazuin. Come for the provocative pictures, stay for the pro–sex work feminist manifesto.

As a sex worker, I'm no stranger to the argument that I can't make decisions about my body, especially decisions pertaining to sex and money. My body is literally my business. Sex work is how I've made money while pursuing my career as a full-time writer and performer. Sex work is flexible, well-paying and, yes, fun. It's not for everyone, but it's ideal for me, and I'm not alone. I'm not an exception to some rule; I'm part of an ever-growing chorus of voices that demands we recognize sex work as work and sex workers as people worthy of love, respect and full protection under the law. I use my privilege to tell my story because so many of us cannot.

So, yes, you bet your ass I consider myself a feminist, and posing nude—whether for PLAYBOY, for my book or as a sex worker—poses no contradiction. My body is mine, after all. I can do whatever I want with it, which happens to include putting its glorious truth on display for all to enjoy. You're welcome.

Andrea Werhun is an author, performer and columnist who writes about sex and consent for Playboy.com. She has been featured in The New York Times and The Guardian and on CBC.

SOFIA BARRETT-IBARRIA, PROFESSIONAL SEXPLORER

I can't remember a time when I wasn't uncomfortable with my body or itching to get out of my own skin. That's not because there's anything wrong with it, but because for as long as I can remember, my body hasn't really been mine. Lingering stares, hugs that lasted too long, catcalls and comments from men taught me early on that I was a sexual object before I could understand why or what that even meant. I never had room to define my sexuality, because it had been defined for me. By men. Later, as I attempted to reimagine myself as a sexualized body, I realized such efforts were attempts at emotional survival.

For many women, our entire existence is politicized. Who we have sex with, when we have sex, how often, whether we procreate, whether we talk (or write) about it in the media, whether we take off our clothes for money—all the above decisions are political in today's climate. We'll always be sexualized without consent and shamed once we capitalize on that. That's all the more true should we enjoy it.

I can't imagine a time when I won't feel painfully uncomfortable in my own body because of this. That is why I've devoted some of my journalism career to writing about sex for men's magazines. It's also why I'm taking off my clothes for one. I'm a hairy, bipolar bisexual with cellulite, stretch marks, self-inflicted scars and some strange moles. I'm not supposed to be in PLAYBOY, but here I am. If I'm not making people uncomfortable, or making them question their views on sex, sexuality and human attraction, I'm not doing my job well. Aside from that, I think I'm hot, and I want you to look at me. It's only human.

I see my work as a writer and my position in the media as ways to reclaim the narrative of my sexuality and define it in new terms. It's a way to take back my image, body and voice in the medium I choose. As the Trump administration works to redefine sexuality, citizenship, the free press and countless other things, I recognize that the freedom to define my own existence is an incredible privilege. And I feel it's my responsibility, and the responsibility of anyone working in journalism and news media, to preserve that freedom for others as well.

Sofia Barrett-Ibarria is a journalist who writes for Esquire, The Cut, Allure, Glamour, Dazed and Broadly.

IF I'M NOT MAKING PEOPLE QUESTION THEIR VIEWS ON SEX AND SEXUALITY, I'M NOT DOING MY JOB WELL.

BRUNA NESSIF, MULTIHYPHENATE MOGUL

For as long as I can remember, I've been fed the limiting belief that I could be either smart or sexy. Never both, because one would discredit the other. So I chose to be smart. I buried my face in books. I became a top student. I graduated with a broadcast journalism degree, pursued writing, became an entrepreneur, launched a website, spoke at the Women's Empowerment Expo and published a self-help book, *Let That Shit Go.* Through many of these accomplishments, I continued to internalize, perhaps subconsciously, a narrative that said I couldn't exude sex appeal because then people wouldn't take me seriously. This caused mental conflict; I knew it was fucked-up. Why did I have to stifle myself as a woman to be accepted?

A turning point for me was remembering when I found a stash of PLAYBOYS in our garage as a kid. I opened up the pages and admired how the Playmates oozed confidence in their bare skin and how unabashed they were about their bodies. Those feelings have stuck with me throughout my life. When I moved into my first apartment, I covered my bedroom walls with photography of naked or scantily clad women because I wanted to become one of those women. Proud. Confident. *Sexy.* I was envious of their ability to embrace their bodies without feeling they had to sacrifice dignity.

It became obvious to me that I had been waiting for someone else to give me my freedom. I was waiting for permission to be sexy and smart, among many other things. After years of searching for external validation, I woke up. Yes, I can be a multidimensional woman. But the only person who can allow that is me. So I've granted myself the ability to explore and exude all parts of me.

Know this: It hasn't always been easy. Even on set for this shoot, I found myself wondering if I would lose respect and credibility after this issue's release. But you know what? It became easy to stop caring. I fought to become this woman. I'm proud of this woman. I always wanted to be this woman, and by giving myself that freedom to become her, I know now that no one can take her away from me.

Bruna Nessif is founder of The Problem With Dating, a website that covers the dating lives of young people. She's a former entertainment journalist and editor for E! Online.

THE GOON IN THE MALTESE BUNNY

ENTER CURVACEOUS BOMBSHELL.

BY Eric Powell
COLORS BY RACHAEL COHEN

IS THIS WHERE THE DAMSEL IN DISTRESS COMES IN? TO FALL AT THE FEET OF THE PRIVATE DICK AND BEG FOR HIS HELP?

SNICKT!

NOT THIS BROAD! AND TONIGHT THAT MALTESE BUNNY IS MINE.

HER NAME IS *VIXEN VON RAZOR*, AND SHE'LL CUT YA AS QUICK AS LOOK AT YA!

NOW ENTER LOCAL STREET HOODS GOON AND FRANKY.

--AND THEN I KICKED HIM WHILE HE WAS DOWN AND SAID, "THERE'S ONE IN THE OLD BREADBASKET, SAUSAGE FACE!"

THAT'S NO WAY TO TREAT CLERGY, FRANKY.

CLUB MONGO

CLUB MONGO. EH, IT'S ONE OF THEM CLASSY JOINTS.

YEAH, THE OWNER IS A HIGHFALUTIN SHOW-OFF. PUTS VALUABLE KNICKKNACKS ALL OVER TO IMPRESS THE RUBES.

SUPPOSED TO GOT A MALTESE BUNNY IN THERE WORTH A FORTUNE.

SO WE SWIPE IT JUST TO SPITE THE ESTABLISHMENT CLASS?

EXACTLY.

AND THIS IS A GOBLIN BY THE NAME OF MAC GIOLLA BHRIDE. GOON ONCE SPOILED HIS CHANCES OF EATING A CORPSE HE RIGHTFULLY WON IN A WRESTLING MATCH... IT'S A LONG STORY.

YES, GOON, GO INTO YER CLUB THERE! PROBABLY TO EAT A PORK CHOP!

NEEDLESS TO SAY, THE IRISH GOBLIN VOWED TO REPAY GOON'S INTERFERENCE BY THROWING IN THE MUD EVERY PORK CHOP HE WOULD EVER TRY TO EAT FOR THE REST OF HIS DAYS.

JUST TRY IT! IN THE MUD SHE'LL GO!

THIS PLACE AIN'T HALF BAD! WONDER WHAT KIND OF CHOW THEY G--

GAH!

WELL, HELLOOOOOO, YOU TWO FINE STRAPPING YOUNG MEN. AND WHAT CAN I GET FOR YOU?

A FORK TO GOUGE MY EYES OUT WOULD BE A START! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU?!

AHEM! I AM YOUR WAITRESS.

YOU'RE A WALKIN' NIGHTMARE! LOOKS LIKE MY GRANNY IF SHE SOLD HER BODY TO THE NIGHT!

BE NICE, FRANKY. THE OLD BROAD IS EARNIN' A LIVIN'. IT'S RESPECTABLE.

MENU

IT AIN'T RESPECTABLE TO MY EYES.

SO WHAT WILL IT BE, GENTLEMEN?

MENU

HMM, I THINK I'LL HAVE THE PORK CHOPS.

AH-HA!!

I MEAN... GOOD CHOICE, SIR.

LOOK, FRANKY. THERE IT IS.

THE MALTESE BUNNY!

YEAH, AND IT'S BEING GUARDED BY THAT BIG GORILLA!

I'VE HANDLED BIGGER THAN HIM. IT WON'T BE--

LOOK!

THERE'S SOME BROAD MAKIN' OFF WITH THE THING WE WAS GONNA MAKE OFF WITH!

HEY, LADY! WHERE YOU TAKIN' THAT BUNNY?

OH, THIS LITTLE THING?

LOOK OUT, GOON! SHE KNOWS THE SECRET ART OF KARAT-TAY!

IF THIS DIDN'T--

HURT SO BAD--

I - THINK - I'D - BE - IN - LOVE!

KARAT-TAY IS NOT ALL I KNOW! I ALSO TOOK A SUMMER CORRESPONDENCE COURSE IN THE BLACK ARTS! I EXCELLED AT TRANSFIGURATION!

THIS FIGHT IS NO LONGER EROTIC IN A SADOMASOCHISTIC WAY AT ALL!!

OH NO, GOON! SHE'S GOT YA! AND AS SOMEONE WHO HAS RECURRING DREAMS ABOUT BEING MANHANDLED BY GIANT LADY INSECTS, I STILL FIND THIS VERY EROTIC!

WATCH, GOON! WATCH AS YOUR BELOVED PORK CHOP FALLS TO THE FLOOR!

WHAT THE--

AWW, SHE DONE BROKE HER NECK. PORK CHOPS... THE SLIPPERY BANANA PEEL OF THE VOLUPTUOUS KNIFE-WIELDING DAME TURNED MONSTER.

THE MALTESE BUNNY!

SNIFF-SNIFF SAAAAY.

THIS THING IS MADE OF CHOCOLATE!

HEY!

HA! NOW EAT YER RABBIT OFF THE FILTHY FLOOR, YA BIG BUFFOON!

CHECK OUT THE NEW GOON SERIES, COMING MARCH 2019 FROM ALBATROSS FUNNYBOOKS! WWW.ALBATROSSFUNNYBOOKS.COM

Hey, Miki!

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ANA DIAS

March Playmate **Miki Hamano** grew up in rural Japan—but as you'll see, this free spirit is as American as they come

When you're young, you can do anything.

I came to the United States as an exchange student when I was 19 years old. Until then, I had never been outside Japan. I first went to Palm Desert for three years, then I moved to San Francisco and got my business degree. It was really difficult because I didn't speak any English—but at the same time, it was an adventure, so I loved it. I learned so many life lessons and I'm much stronger mentally. Still, I don't think I could do it now, so I want to say "good job" to my younger self.

People ask me, "What do you want to do 10 years from now? What do you want to be?" I don't know. I don't make life plans. I live each moment as it comes. What's meant to happen will happen. Maybe you don't know why now, but you will later. I think super positive thoughts; I constantly say, "This is going to be good." It's all about your brain. It's all about how you think.

I used to be hard on myself—a result of comparing myself to other people. All the girls in L.A. are so gorgeous, I thought I had to be like them. I worked out constantly and did all these injections, which are gone now. I felt like I was trying to be somebody else. Now I know there's freedom in being in your natural state. That's why everyone should be allowed to speak their mind and express themselves without fear. Being comfortable in my own skin doesn't mean I want to be objectified; it means I'm loving myself and embracing who I am.

The technology we have access to now makes it easy to share our ideas, and good ones are being shared a lot faster. It's amazing to see strong women, and men too, from all over the world speaking up for what they believe in and making a huge impact on issues that have existed for probably every generation before ours. I'm thankful I live in a time and place when people can express themselves so freely. It's relatively recent that people started talking about feminism. We have a long way to go; it all takes time. ■

DATA SHEET

BIRTHPLACE: Sapporo, Japan **CURRENT CITY:** Los Angeles, California

ON INDEPENDENCE

When I was growing up, my parents were always busy, so I never really saw much of them. I learned to be self-sufficient at a young age. I have always been independent. I don't expect anybody to do things for me. I just want to be myself—that's the goal.

ON CRAVINGS

Lately I've been eating raw. I love Japanese food, and Mexican too. Burritos, tacos, ceviche—I eat Mexican food every day.

ON GOALS

My life is here now. I don't want to go back to Japan. Where I'm from is just a lot of trees and nothing much happening. But I still love nature! San Francisco is my future home. I want a dog and a big yard surrounded by trees. I want to have apple trees and a garden. That's my complete life.

ON FINDING IT

I definitely appreciate art, and I have a lot of respect for artists. I'm not a very good painter or sculptor, but I've done everything. You just need something, one thing you love, something you're good at. Every one of us can find it.

ON VISION

I intentionally never wear glasses or contacts when I'm shooting. I like not being able to see everything. I guess I still get a little nervous sometimes, so I prefer not seeing everyone's facial expressions. I can just do my own thing, go into my own world.

ON WHAT'S REAL

I get it: People feel uncomfortable with nipples, but we *all* have nipples. I hope people get more comfortable with what we have. I don't feel uncomfortable being naked. It's a natural thing. It's soothing when my bare skin touches the earth; it reminds me what's real.

ON EARTHLY POSSESSIONS

I just don't own expensive things. I get scared that I'm going to lose them.

ON ICONS

When I think about what's sexy, I envision Marilyn Monroe—that classic ideal. That's the kind of sexiness I don't have, and that's perfectly fine. I'm content with being myself. The best compliment is being told you're not trying too hard.

ON ATTRACTION

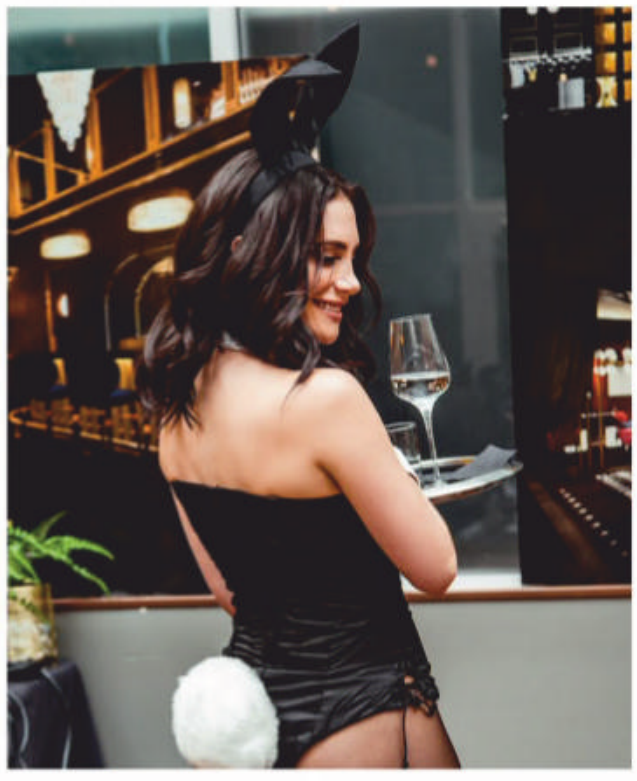
I like guys who are straightforward, smart and kind to others. For me, sexy is not only how you look but how much you're connected to your true self. I feel sexy when I'm being true to myself and living boldly!

MARCH 2019 PLAYMATE

MARCH 2019 PLAYMATE

THE BUNNIES TAKE MANHATTAN

Bringing the Playboy Club back to New York City wasn't all cocktails and cottontails. Peek behind the curtain and meet a new generation of Bunnies as they ramp up to opening night



On a humid late-summer afternoon, a group of roughly 60 women and men have assembled in a midtown Manhattan hotel conference room. It's a glass-roofed atrium space, tucked into a courtyard, and if the inhabitants of a nearby skyscraper were to peer down they'd likely conclude that this was just another run-of-the-mill business meeting.

Inside the room, though, there's a sense of history being made. In three weeks, everyone here will play a part in the launch of the new Playboy Club New York—the Rabbit's first Manhattan pied-à-terre since the previous location closed its doors in 1986.

"We have waited literally three decades for this day," says a dapper silver-templed man named Al Lopez, addressing the group. Lopez, whose background includes working with culinary icon Danny Meyer and orchestrating dinners for the United Nations General Assembly, is the club's director of operations. He's joined at the front of the room by two others: Kristi Beck, a brand-strategy and product manager at Playboy, who travels the country overseeing venues and events; and Richie Notar, the club's creative director, best known as a co-owner of Nobu.

BY **SIMON DUMENCO**

Once Lopez has wrapped up his remarks, Notar explains to the people in the room what they've signed on for. It's something like Broadway, he says: "When you go to Broadway, you've paid a lot of money for those tickets. Matthew Broderick *hits* it. He hits that note *every day*. The curtain goes up? Showtime."

The "stage" of this particular show is right next door, a 14,000-square-foot space in which swarms of workers are busy carrying out the vision of star interior designer Cenk Fikri.

And the inductees in the conference room? Playboy Bunnies, along with assorted bartenders and barbacks. At the moment, everyone is incognito, studiously taking notes in his or her Playboy-issued notebook. It feels like a graduate seminar in nightlife, hospitality and...something harder to pin down.

And yes, Lopez says at one point, there will be a quiz.

• • •

A few days later, the Bunnies and their colleagues are engaging in a staff bonding exercise. They've broken into groups of eight or nine, seated at round tables, to talk about their backgrounds. If you were picturing the Bunnies as an assortment of vapid and indistinguishable blondes, this exercise would set you straight.

One volunteer at each table is asked to stand and introduce her colleagues to the larger group. A woman named Regina goes first, revealing that she's a New Jersey native who does stand-up comedy, which prompts applause and a collective laugh. Regina then goes around her table: "Here we have Jerri. She's originally from Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and she's a criminal justice student. Aleah is originally from Michigan, and she's a professional ballet dancer in the city. Here we have Sammi—she's from Harlem and she's a competitive boxer. Gia is from Staten Island, and she's a dance teacher and a studio owner...."

At other tables there are more performers—dancers and actors and even another comedian—as well as graduate students, but no one gets a louder round of applause than Ashley, a Long Island native who's a former WWE wrestler.

"How do we follow that?" someone in the room exclaims, prompting another wave of laughter.

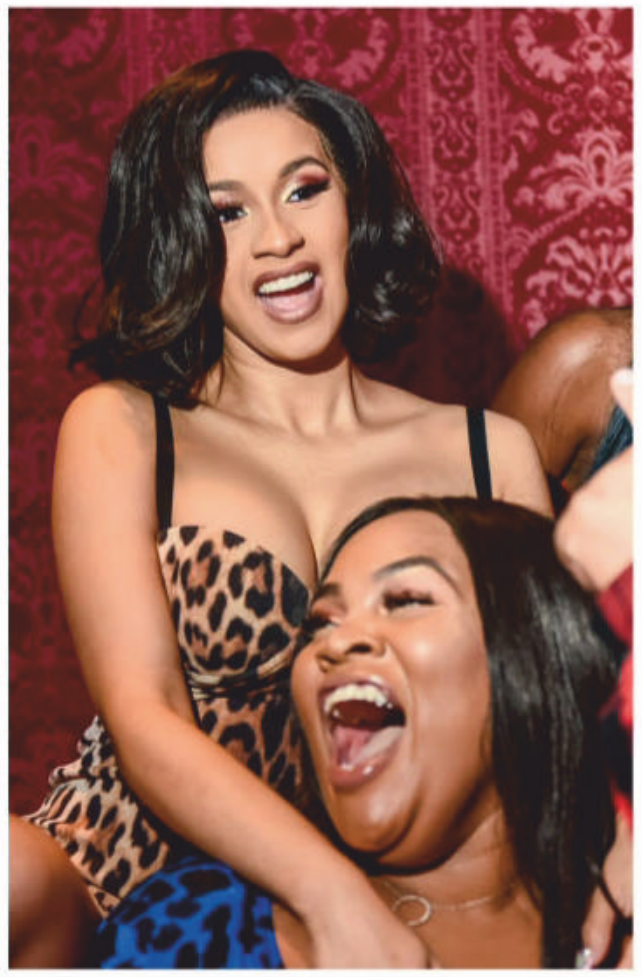
• • •

With opening night looming, the staff training intensifies. For the first time, the Bunnies are in full Bunny regalia all together.

Having met once again with Irene Juhasz, the club's master tailor, small groups of women enter the room wearing an updated version of the very first company uniform to be registered by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. Playboy founder Hugh Hefner hired African American designer Zelda Wynn Valdes—who worked with the likes of Ella Fitzgerald and Mae West—to create the Bunny costume back in the 1960s. Today's version remains faithful to the original, though the look is now supplemented with accessories (a cummerbund, a nameplate) designed by Roberto Cavalli.

Once every Bunny is fully dressed, there's a break in the training session. Virtually every Bunny's immediate instinct is to huddle into groups of three or four to pose for selfies.

Opening spread, clockwise from far left: *Bunnies Jordan Emanuel (also our December 2018 Playmate), Illeana Pennetto and Rosana Hernandez in Times Square; the front bar—and the calm before the storm; chef Tabitha Yeh adorns caviar-stuffed beggars' purses; a Bunny in training; last-minute finishes on a Bunny costume.* ***Below, clockwise from left:*** *Bunny Aleah Gani glows on opening night; hospitality legend and Playboy Club creative director Richie Notar; popping bottles.*



Above: *Playmates Shelby Rose, Cassandra Dawn, Dana Taylor, Brande Roderick and Raquel Pomplun hold court; Cardi B and her crew party as some of the club's first guests.*

"I love your hair," one Bunny tells another as she adjusts her colleague's ears. "It's so 1920s—so Josephine Baker," she adds, referencing the Jazz Age icon who, incidentally, was also dressed by Zelda Wynn Valdes.

• • •

"A little farther back," Kristi Beck is telling a Bunny-in-training. "A little farther. Yeah, that's good."

In an early-afternoon session, Beck is teaching the group about the Bunny Dip, a distinctive serving method dating back to the clubs' early days—and a handy way to swoop in with an order without, say, bopping a guest with a cottontail.

I've been drafted to be a guinea pig—a stand-in guest seated at a conference-room table—and a series of Bunnies are, one by one, greeting me and serving me my pretend drink order from a tray. I notice that the camaraderie among the newly costumed Bunnies is now accompanied by a note of tension.

"Here's your Ketel One and soda," a Bunny improvs (it's actually tap water, alas) while doing the Bunny Dip. It seems like a pretty good Bunny Dip to me, but Beck has notes. Across the table, a Bunny serving Lopez fumbles, narrowly avoiding him but splashing water down the front of her outfit.

"It's all right, it's all right," Lopez says. "Now, let's try that again. I'm going to bring out some red wine."

There's nervous laughter in the room. Is he kidding? (He is kidding. For now.)

The challenge at hand is sinking in: Playboy Bunnies have to be not only fast and efficient servers but the glamorous and graceful gatekeepers to the world of Playboy—and to hit that note *every day*.

• • •

The weekend before opening night, *The New York Times* devotes much of the front page of its Sunday Styles section to the club, with the subhead "A defiant time capsule surfaces, smack in the middle of #MeToo country." And though it includes criticism from feminist leader Gloria Steinem of the very concept of the Playboy Club—echoing her 1963 takedown in *Show* magazine, for which she worked undercover at the original New York Playboy Club—the story largely focuses on the enduring bond shared by the original Bunnies. The now 75-year-old Bunny Kathryn Leigh Scott told the paper about "the caring and selfless reaching out that exists among this sisterhood of Bunnies." (Scott authored a 1998 history of Bunnydom titled *The Bunny Years*.)

Lauren Hutton, the actress and proto-supermodel, also spoke fondly of her days as a Bunny. "I think it's a great job for a girl if she's got no training in anything, like me," she told the *Times,* which noted that she had been rejected by "several fast-food joints" before landing her Bunny gig.

That's one detail from the early history of the Playboy Club that seems particularly anachronistic. Today's Bunnies strike me as preternaturally confident and charismatic pros. Virtually all of them, in addition to their mainline career paths, have hospitality-industry backgrounds. Beyond that, these new recruits are already deep into their Bunny sisterhood. Maybe that's the elusive energy I sensed back at the orientation.

Meanwhile, the *Times* coverage is a big hit with the club team; they promptly share a photo of the article on Instagram.

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"The Playboy brand is obviously one of the great American treasures," Robin Thicke says. It's opening night and we're talking in his dressing room, the rapidly filling club sending low, pulsing vibrations through the walls. He adds that he once hitched a ride on Hef's private jet, and that his father, the late actor Alan Thicke, was a regular at Mansion West.

Thicke is set to perform tonight in the club's event space, the Black Box. "New York City, the Playboy Club grand opening? That's an easy yes," he says.

Outside, a line snakes down the block despite persistent rain. A moist scrum of paparazzi do their thing at the edge of the red carpet, where they'll remain until the wee hours.

Thicke plays a six-song set and closes, of course, with "Blurred Lines," one of the best-selling singles of all time. "Everybody get up, everybody get up," he croons, and the crowd, their energy spilling beyond the Black Box and filling every one of the club's freshly burnished chambers, completes the verses: "Hey, hey, hey!"

At the moment, all eyes are on him, though earlier all eyes were on Martha Stewart—one of the most head-turning arrivals of the night—not to mention Ice-T and Coco and Kelly Bensimon and Dierks Bentley and....

But wait. Honestly, those celebrities don't come close to the alchemical star power of Regina, Jerri, Aleah, Sammi, Gia, Ashley and the other Bunnies.

Everybody—seriously, *everybody*—wants a selfie with them. ■

BY **SLOANE CROSLEY**

THE ART OF ***THE REAL***

AS A POLARIZED AMERICA CONTINUES TO DEBATE WHETHER TO BRAND HER A HERO OR A WHORE, **STORMY DANIELS** FORGES AHEAD WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT SHE'S NEITHER

It took me longer than I care to admit to connect the name "Stormy Daniels" with the names she'd given her double-D breasts: "Thunder" and "Lightning." Perhaps this is my own idiocy—a blonde moment in an otherwise brunette life?—but perhaps this is the first time you're putting it together too. I think I know why. Although Stormy Daniels, whose legal name is Stephanie Clifford, is one of the most award-winning stars of adult film and, she says, one of porn's highest-paid directors (she wrote, directed and starred in several adult blockbusters), she entered the mainstream American consciousness only in early 2018, when the existence of a nondisclosure agreement and a corresponding $130,000 payment between her and Donald Trump's then lawyer, Michael Cohen, came to light. By the time I knew who she was, the sex she'd had on camera was not as meaningful as the *idea* of the sex she'd had on camera. Not to mention the *idea* of the sex she'd had with Donald Trump. Which, on a deeply unfortunate note, puts me in the same logic league as Rudy Giuliani, who dismissed her "value" because she sold "her body for money." Republicans and Democrats may have come to vastly different conclusions about the meaning of this woman, but we are all responsible for using the same math to get there: We saw her as a certain kind of person.

Overnight, Stormy—and Thunder and Lightning—were thrust into the political spotlight and placed into a kind of subject-object gender-studies centrifuge. For liberals she was (and still is) a brassy bullet point for the reality-television series streaming from the White House: Stormy the Warrior. Stormy the Neoliberal Feminist. Stormy the Hero America Deserves. It *would* be a porn star who screws over Donald Trump. Oh, the dirty irony! It *would* be someone prone to self-promotion and mass generalizations about herself (on Twitter: "I never do shit the easy way"; in *Rolling Stone:* "Standing up to bullies is kind of my thing"), someone who has wrestled far scarier pigs than this one. "Horseface"? That's it? Her lawsuit was going to take down the president, and she was going to expand the reach of the #MeToo movement. For conservatives she was (and still is) the embodiment of everything that's wrong with a loose-morals America, a capitalist harlot come to besmirch a man whose only crime is wanting to make America great just one more time before his own policies cause it to fall into the ocean.

But back to her breasts. No, really.

While we've been busy objectifying Daniels, she has spent the past two decades beating us to the punch. In her 2018 memoir, *Full Disclosure,* she says that when she got the call to visit Trump in his hotel room, she gave Thunder and Lightning "a wake-up call and went over." She knows her augmented assets are an integral part of what people imagine, if they choose to imagine. They are also emblematic of who she is. Most porn stars do not name their body parts; it's not in their contracts. But Stormy Daniels named her breasts like some men name their penises. This is a power move unto itself, and because she is a woman, it has a less blustery meaning. She is not trying to improve them by naming them. Instead, their names reveal the funny, confident, savvy person underneath, the one who dares you to slut-shame her. Go ahead, see what happens. Do you think she doesn't know what she does for a living?

This cheekiness—the idea that any kind of sex worker might have a brain—should no longer come as a shock. Sasha Grey has done more than her fair share to fix that with her activism and hipster appeal, Tera Patrick has a microbiology degree, and seemingly half of female porn stars have nursing degrees. But unlike them, Stormy Daniels is not angling for her chance to become something else. A second career does not equate to an apology for the first one for those other women either, but in Stormy's case, there's nothing to be condemned to or redeemed from. You will not find Thunder and Lightning hidden under a lab coat anytime soon...except maybe on set.

This is the essential and perhaps most enduring truth of Stormy Daniels: There's not an inch of her that she doesn't own. She is not a woman who does anything by accident. Which is why, I believe, people put so much stock in her opinions even as she declines to give them.

STYLING BY KELLEY ASH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **SASHA SAMSONOVA**

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She has managed to be the cool center of a salacious hurricane without becoming host to anyone's agenda. The result, when she speaks, is a kind of Stormy-specific feminism. It's not that she doesn't care about other women, but she may be the one female public figure who refuses to be in conversation with this moment in history. It's as if she's trying to pass through it like a bullet—and for her, it's working. She's an opt-out anti-feminist feminist. Confused? Well, then perhaps it's time to get it straight from the horse's mouth.

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Before Stormy's manager puts us in touch, he wants to be sure our conversation won't be "a rehashing of the Trump night." When I realize what he means, I think of hot blades, windowless bunkers, unrated versions of *The Human Centipede*—images that, like details of the president in bed, I would pay good money to never experience. I assure him he has nothing to worry about. Even if I did want to know, I suspect Stormy herself is fuzzy on the play-by-play. For America, there may have been trauma, but for Stormy, there was not. She has repeatedly stressed that this was a consensual dalliance. I doubt she so much as thought about it after that appearance on *The Apprentice* didn't pan out.

"Yeah," she says over the phone, laughing. "I keep thinking, Oh, guys, you're not going to be the reporter who suddenly makes me remember this epic thing I forgot and somehow didn't put in my book!"

If she had something unique to sell, she would have sold it herself. Stormy is often positioned as Trump's counterweight. Although she is transactional (she has referred to her "free" *60 Minutes* interview), she is not amoral. She's just a woman who knows her value, who is sick of the "Madonna-whore complex." But while I think she has face-planted into Feminism 101 (on the Kavanaugh hearings: "I found it really frustrating that [Christine Blasey Ford] is automatically more credible and I'm automatically not as credible just because of our professions"), she does not agree.

"It's not that I don't identify with feminism," she says. "I just think it's gone way too far. It has lost its original connotation. I love men, and I think they're kind of getting a bad rap right now. I don't want to be a part of that. I don't know a single guy who should be punished because your great-grandmother didn't get to vote."

This is a cauldron of generalization (polar bears should not be punished because of gun control?), but I see her larger point. The dialogue presented to her about this stuff is presented largely through the internet, which is not a bastion of subtlety. There's a lot of screaming, and because the dismissal of women's anger as exaggerated or self-righteous is part of the problem, it can be tricky to navigate the conversation.

"There's just no middle ground. There's no one on the internet saying, 'Stormy Daniels is a cool chick.' It's either I'm a hero who's going to save the universe, and a patriot—I haven't gone to war!—or I'm a disgusting disease-ridden whore and I should be shot in the head and my kid should be euthanized. Literally, my Twitter time line is 'You're my hero'; 'I'm gonna murder your child'; 'You're my hero'; 'I'm gonna murder your child.' "

Can you blame her for not wanting to be part of the conversation? She can't remember the last time she googled herself. And as for politics? Well, no thank you to that too.

"My contribution to society is to provide people an escape. A large portion of my fan base is guys in the military or people going through difficult times, and the last thing they want to think about is that stuff. My job is to give these guys 12 minutes where politics don't exist. And the last thing you want to do is get in an argument with a customer."

This was ingrained in her when she was "18 and working at the local titty bar." If men attempted to engage her in a political discussion, which they would, especially around election time, she would change the subject with "Let's talk about sex!" Indeed, it is capitalism and not feminism that drives her current club tour, Make America Horny Again.

"But now," she concedes, "I'm in too deep and I've seen too much. I've been put in this position that goes against everything I've believed in my 20-year career. Being in the adult business is really strange culturally. Nobody wants you to do it, but pretty much everyone has been a consumer in some way. They all think you should stop, but they won't allow you to do anything else. If you leave porn and try to get a different job, either you don't get hired or you get fired. That has happened to so many girls I know. It's not a thing that happens to men."

She concedes that it's getting better for sex workers in general but it's "like baby steps up a mountain." Still, the time she spends thinking about her legacy is more personal than national. For one thing, she's convinced she's "probably going to die alone," which she drops when we start talking about relationships. She is recently divorced from her third husband and knows that "the second any guy's friends and family and strangers find out who he's dating, he's going to get shit. He's going to get told to get an STD test and 'Oh, don't get her pregnant; the baby's just going to fall out of her giant pussy.' Who wants to deal with that?" Meanwhile, her daughter is "not in a stroller anymore"; if someone approaches Stormy and "says something fucked-up," her daughter will ask about it. Stormy is also a competitive equestrian...and even that seemingly innocuous space is no longer safe.

"I'm not anonymous anymore," she says. "Who knows when I ride into the ring if the judge isn't a big Trump fan? Everything is skewed."

When I ask if she identifies with a female heroine, fictional or otherwise, Stormy pauses for a moment before answering: "Jodie Foster's character in *The Accused,*" she says, referring to the parallels in the film to the sexual abuse she suffered as a child and the fact that she wasn't believed "because I was poor and my mom was white trash."

But make no mistake: Stormy's allergy to the word *victim* is extreme. Her life, though tumultuous, is full and successful. And that predates Donald Trump. We will not remember her as the woman who took down the most misogynistic president in U.S. history because,

well, she didn't. But she also wasn't trying. She just wanted to tell the truth. And though she foresees bottomless notoriety, her role here is hardly fixed. Like tabloid croquet, something more salacious could come along any minute and knock it out. Who knows what scandals lurk in the shadows? What we do know is that Stormy Daniels will be remembered as the woman who brought the thunder and the lightning to this presidency.

Before we hang up she casually mentions a less famous legal battle in which she's currently embroiled.

"There was this trainer in Texas who was abusing and killing horses," she explains, "and I was the first one to say anything. Then hundreds of other people started coming forward. I just got this text forwarded to me from some little girl's mom. It said, 'I don't know Stormy, but my daughter could've ended up at the wrong place and she could've gotten really hurt. I want to thank her for using her voice and doing what was right.' "

"That must feel good," I say.

"Yeah," she says. "Of course it does." ■

Extra Credit

From the world of PlayboyCenterfolds.com—a bookish afternoon with Russian stunner Taya Vais

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
DÁVID MERÉNYI

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HERITAGE

A Phenomenal Woman

In 1999, former PLAYBOY *editor Murray Fisher flew to the East Coast to speak with legendary American poet Maya Angelou. Their conversation, intended to be a Playboy Interview, never ran, the copy at some point misfiled and forgotten. Nearly 20 years after it took place, the dialogue was discovered by our archivists. Covering everything from religion to racism and, of course, writing, this remarkable piece of history is as relevant today as it was two decades ago.*

Novelist ***Edwidge Danticat*** *introduces Fisher's once lost, and thankfully now found, Playboy Interview with Maya Angelou.*

I first met Maya Angelou in print. I arrived in the United States from Haiti at the age of 12 and, after reading all the books by Haitian and French writers I could find at the main branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, resolved to start reading in English. One afternoon, on a display table at the library entrance, I came across *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* the first book in Angelou's multivolume autobiography. On its cover, a barefoot little black girl stood, completely lost in reading, in front of a modest wooden cabin that looked like the one where I had spent my childhood summers. Even before I cracked it open, I knew I'd found a kindred spirit in the author.

Maya Angelou and I were born and raised in different countries during different eras, but we had much in common. She too had been left as a young girl in the care of relatives, in her case her grandmother in tiny Stamps, Arkansas, and in my case my aunt and uncle in Port-au-Prince. She too survived sexual abuse as a child, though her abuser was punished in a way that made her feel she should punish herself by not speaking from the ages of seven to 13. In Angelou's silence, however, were planted the seeds of a powerful writing voice. She devoured great works of literature, from Thomas Wolfe to Gustave Flaubert to Charles Dickens and many others. When Angelou was 17 (having returned to her mother's care a few years earlier), she had a baby, left home with her infant son and undertook an eclectic and extraordinary breadth of pursuits—dancer, madam, actor, civic organizer, playwright. She eventually flourished, blossoming not just as a nuanced and commanding writer but also an extraordinary orator.

In person Maya Angelou was tall and elegant, looking every bit the regal aging dancer she was. She had a booming, musical voice that sounded as though she might break into song at any time. When I first heard her speak, at Brown University, where I was a graduate student, I wept as she described her childhood rape and how speaking about it had led her uncles to kill her attacker. I remember Angelou closing her remarks by reciting, as casually as she might say "Good morning," a few lines from "Phenomenal Woman," one of her seminal poems: "I'm a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman / That's me."

We met again a few years later, after my first novel was published. We were together on a panel about migration, and she reminded the audience of how her ancestors had been brought to America in the holds of slave ships, yet this diaspora had given the world the gift of beauty through jazz and other art forms.

I would add to the list of gifts that African Americans have given the world Maya Angelou herself, who transformed her personal pain and the agony of her people into so many different artistic endeavors, including

poetry, prose, song, dance and theater, as well as the movies she directed and acted in. Her abundant gifts to us continue in this "lost" interview, conducted in 1999 by Murray Fisher at Angelou's sprawling North Carolina home. By that time, Angelou was well established in the literary firmament, having received countless honors, including being chosen to recite her poetry at President Bill Clinton's first inauguration.

Since Angelou's death in May 2014 at the age of 86, I have occasionally wondered what she might say about certain recent events in the U.S. and around the world. What would she say, for example, about cell phone videos of black men, women and children having the police called on them for existing while black, or about the documented police and vigilante killings of innocent people of color, or about the election of Donald Trump and the false equivalencies made between peaceful protests and white supremacist marches? What would she say about the #MeToo movement, or the various threats to our environment and increasingly endangered planet?

I don't think it's accidental that this interview has been discovered now, uncovered from deep inside a box of decades-old correspondence, writers' contracts and expense reports. I believe that Maya Angelou wants to speak to us from the land of the ancestors and somehow managed, with her trademark eloquence, to convince those in charge of the great beyond to deliver her words to us.

"Quite often one falls into the same role as the brute that you're opposing. And I don't want to do that," she tells Fisher. "If I'm just one good guy and there are 5 billion bad guys, I still want to have the courage to be the good guy."

I can't imagine better advice for the times we live in. From the distant and great unknown, Maya Angelou's unwavering voice continues to guide us well.

Previous page: *Angelou, circa 1995. In 1993, she read at the presidential inauguration; in 2010, she received the Medal of Freedom.* ***Above:*** *Publicity still for the 1972 feature Georgia, Georgia, for which Angelou wrote the screenplay. Her many writing credits include the TV adaptation of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. She was also an actor, director and producer.* ***Right:*** *Angelou, circa 1980.*

PLAYBOY: As you've moved from one episode of your life to another, you seem to have taken on new personas with each chapter you were living. And yet somehow they manage to come out of a piece.

ANGELOU: I suppose everybody's life is really a living patchwork quilt. There are those who would like to think that their lives are long tapestries. The truth is that everybody's life is a matter of happenstance, mis-happenstance, intention and accident, courage and cowardice. No matter how disparate the segments are, somehow it works as a quilt, the same way that colors in nature work graciously. Red, blue, orange, purple and yellow—nature throws it all out there and it works wonderfully.

PLAYBOY: As you reflect on the pattern of your life and your accomplishments, what does it all add up to in your mind?

ANGELOU: It depends on what time of day I'm asked or if I've slept well the night before, read something that really pleased me or displeased me. Sometimes I agree with the preacher—vanity of vanities, all is vanity. And at other times I think I've been wonderfully blessed to be able to say something or write something, to live a certain way that makes life a little better for someone else.

I'm writing a piece that will be sung by Miss Jessye Norman at Carnegie Hall in 2000. I'm writing the mature woman. Miss Toni Morrison has been asked to write the young woman, and Clarissa Estés has been asked to write the middle-aged woman. When I spoke with Miss Norman, I realized that what people think happens to the mature person is romance—that you think you know something, you've come to certain conclusions, deductions have been made and tested—but it's just the opposite. I know for a fact that I know absolutely nothing now. And I feel more like a young person as I prepare for this next great adventure, which is life after death—or whatever it turns out to be. And so just as a 10-year-old is anxious and excited and avid and eager and wondering, so am I.

I can't really see the wisdom that people say I have. I've taken a lot of chances and I've come through. I've learned the hard way—if you go in the dark just beyond that tree, there's a big hole. You can fall in that hole and break your ankle. I've done that, so I've learned how to fall without breaking my ankle. That's simply the result of having lived and tried and missed and finally found my way.

PLAYBOY: But it doesn't feel like wisdom?

ANGELOU: It doesn't to me. I'm so busy living, I haven't yet come to the place where I feel like I know everything.

PLAYBOY: You have described yourself as "always talking about the human condition—about what we can endure, dream, fail at, and still survive."

ANGELOU: It's amazing that we are able not only to survive but to do better than that. We endure and we thrive—with passion and compassion and humor and style. We are people to match the mountain.

PLAYBOY: After all you've accomplished, all you've been through, what do you still want?

ANGELOU: I want to laugh, and I would like a love in my life. But I don't expect it. I've had it.

I'd like to write better. I have the dream to write so well that a reader is 50 pages into a book of mine before he knows he's reading. I think it was Nathaniel Hawthorne who said, "Easy reading is damned hard writing." And it is. To write a sentence so gracious it slips off the page, that's it. Some critics review my work by saying, "Maya Angelou is a natural writer." Being a natural writer is much like

> To write a sentence so gracious it slips off the page, that's it.

being a natural open-heart surgeon. So what I have to do, and will spend the rest of my life doing, is trying to write the most graceful and gracious English ever. And whatever the story, my mode of telling it is through writing. It's a good thing I love English. I just have to pray for the intelligence and courage to ask of it everything I want.

PLAYBOY: Have you thought about where your skills come from?

ANGELOU: Well, for about six years, from when I was seven to 13, I was a mute. And I loved to hear people speak. I still do. I've heard things they said which were painful, but I've never heard a voice, a human voice, that didn't please me—never. I used to think I could make my whole body an ear. And I could walk into a room and absorb sound. I've been able to speak 10, 11, 12 languages; I can get around in six or seven now. It's really because I love to hear human beings talk and sing that I've listened so assiduously, and out of that came the love of language.

PLAYBOY: Did you feel lonely growing up?

ANGELOU: Yes. I still feel it. Living is lonely.

PLAYBOY: How do you overcome it?

ANGELOU: I don't know if I really overcome it. I live with it. I get a book of poetry or walk around looking at paintings and sculpture, or listen to a little Ray Charles, or sometimes a little Chopin, maybe some country-and-western music. It lifts my heart and reminds me that I'm not out here alone, that there are other people just touching my shoulders who are just as lonely. And somehow I'm able to get up the next morning and start all over again.

PLAYBOY: What do you feel was the effect of not having a father?

ANGELOU: Well, I can't say, since I didn't have one. I had my brother Bailey. He was very bright and he was my best friend. And I had Uncle Willie, my father's brother.

PLAYBOY: Are you reminded of a husband's absence now and then?

ANGELOU: At first I guess I missed having a man to love, but now I'm not aware of it frequently. My life is very full and my responsibilities are many and my delight is plural, so I don't think about it often. I've had somebody funny and mad, somebody who had his own life, and I had my own life. My last marriage ended in 1981, and I would have sworn that by 1984 or 1985 I would be amenable to some new approach. But I've met no one who caught my fancy. I'd rather be alone than involved in a relationship that doesn't serve either me or a husband.

PLAYBOY: Why do you think your relationships haven't worked out?

ANGELOU: I don't know but that they *have* worked out—in what they were meant to be. I think my best marriage was my last marriage. And it was wonderful. We simply wore the marriage out.

PLAYBOY: How would you like to spend the rest of your life?

ANGELOU: Writing. I'm working on a book now and it's being difficult, but it will turn. What I've been able to do with my life is take lemons and use them to make lemonade and lemon pie, lemon tarts, even lemon candies. This book is very hard. I have to deal with the death of Malcolm X, and I have to write about Martin. I've written that I was very close to breaking down. Now I have to write about Dr. King's death. And out of those horrors I have to find...not a raison d'être, but maybe an answer to questions I'm not yet ready to face.

PLAYBOY: How well did you know Dr. King?

ANGELOU: I was the northern coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and when Dr. King came to New York, I traveled with him to speak at different churches and congregations. I would not claim closeness. Friendliness, but not friendship.

PLAYBOY: What was the role of the black church in your early life?

ANGELOU: Well, I loved to see black people together. I really love the way black people look, so I've always enjoyed church, just to see the people. There's a lady in peach and a man in a dark suit and a woman in white and then somebody else in purple and green, and all those colors against the colors of the skin tones still make me catch my breath. I love the music and I loved the poetry of the sermon and the poetry of the lyric. So the church was a gathering place and an artistic center. And as I began to become religious myself, I began to love the Lord for the beauty of the world he's given us. So I loved the church. If I don't go, it goes with me anyway.

PLAYBOY: Do you ever feel reluctant to continue writing about your deepest feelings?

ANGELOU: No. I wrote honestly about the end of my marriage in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes.* There are no real romantic relationships from which I learned anything or was able to teach anything. Nothing is supposed to last forever; I don't spend a lot of time bemoaning that. I'm proud and happy for those who have those relationships. I look at them like new flowers coming up in a blanket of snow.

PLAYBOY: What's something that you learned from your mother?

ANGELOU: One of the things my mom did for me, all those years ago, was to inform me that even life had no right to grapple me to the ground and put its knee in my throat. I won't stay in a relationship that is not productive and kind and funny and supportive. I won't. No, no. I won't live with that at any cost.

PLAYBOY: When you were growing up, you and Bailey seemed to be a family unto yourself.

ANGELOU: When he was 13 he introduced me to Thomas Wolfe and Kenneth Patchen and Aldous Huxley. I give him a lot of credit for what I'd like to claim is my psychological balance, if not sanity. I was six foot. He was small and he was older than me, but very cute. He took a lot of ribbing, and people laughed at me. But he'd take me aside and whisper, "You know I'm smarter than you." But I could talk to him better than anybody else.

PLAYBOY: Looking through your life, you have more than enough reason to have developed a real distrust and hostility toward white people. But you don't seem to have done that.

ANGELOU: I thought that the white people in Stamps, my little village in Arkansas, were very different from the whites I read about in Dickens and de Maupassant and Flaubert; those were likable people. I understood that if they knew me, they'd like me a lot. And I loved Edgar Allan Poe at that time; I was crazy for Poe.

When I went back to live with my mom I was 13, and she had white friends and they were to be called Auntie and Uncle, as her black friends were called, and that seemed to me to be right. It didn't strain my believability. I think that those trained attitudes of hate built upon differences are given to young people at somebody else's whim and for someone else's convenience. It doesn't help the young person at all. Nobody in my family, even in the South, said you had to hate white folks.

PLAYBOY: You seem to have made up your own rules about life as you went along.

ANGELOU: That's very true. But I had a lot of encouragement, and I still do. Bailey and my mom really encouraged me to be bodacious. I think I would have let them down had I not been creative, and even when I made mistakes, nobody put me down for making them.

PLAYBOY: At a certain point, people who have been unlucky in love begin to blame themselves for making the wrong choices. You don't do that.

ANGELOU: Not at all. I don't know if I made any wrong choices. I've had some good times and some bad times, but that's just what life is.

PLAYBOY: Have you at any point lived a life beset by fears?

ANGELOU: Since I was about 20 I've been painfully aware that I was mortal. And I feared death.

PLAYBOY: Why?

ANGELOU: I don't know. That was when my wisdom teeth grew in or something. I didn't even know for the first six months or so that that's what I was fearing. When I closed my eyes I could see incredible creatures. Creatures that don't live anywhere except in my imagination—and I could hear sounds. I knew it was madness. I talked to my mom and to my brother, and it was Bailey who said, "What you're really fearing is death."

PLAYBOY: Do you think he was right?

ANGELOU: I know he was right. I realized this was the one promise that would not be broken. Once I got that clear in my mind, by the time I was 25, I could relax and live because I knew I could die and would. That was the end of the dread and the presence of fear in my life, like an uninvited armed guest sitting in my living room. Once I thought "No"—what a relief; now I don't have to fear anything.

PLAYBOY: How would you like things to go from here on?

ANGELOU: I'd like not to have this pain in my hip; that's for openers. And closers too. I'd like to finish this book and to direct a couple more movies. I'd also like to continue developing my relationship with my grandson. And I'd like to see my son in better health.

PLAYBOY: Three important women have helped shape your life—your grandma Annie Henderson; your mother, Vivian Baxter Johnson; and Mrs. Flowers. Could you talk a little bit about Mrs. Flowers?

ANGELOU: Mrs. Flowers was the mother of two men from Arkansas—one leading doctor and one leading civil rights lawyer. She was so grand. She was very, very black, very beautiful and she spoke very softly. Mrs. Flowers spoke with great diction and great elocution. She would come to my grandmother's store and say, "I will receive you this afternoon at five o'clock for tea cookies." And I would go up there. My grandmother would take a pencil and a knife and cut a groove in the pencil, tie a string onto the pencil and then tie the other part of the string to the spindle of a nickel tablet. So that was my kit and that went in my skirt, and that's how I made my way through life. When anybody asked me questions, I would write on this tablet.

PLAYBOY: That's the period when you weren't speaking?

ANGELOU: Yes. I would go up to Mrs. Flowers, and her house smelled like vanilla because she'd made tea cookies. She always had the curtains down, and it was so cozy, and she would read to me. I thought she was the grandest thing.

PLAYBOY: You must have touched something inside her.

ANGELOU: In the 1970s I met a black lady who led the children into the high school in Little Rock that caused Orval Faubus to act stupidly and gave Eisenhower a chance to send down the National Guard. This lady and I became friends. I was telling her about Mrs. Flowers, and she said, "I know her; she lives down the street from me." So when she went back to Little Rock, she told Mrs. Flowers that she'd met me, and Mrs. Flowers wrote me a letter. She said, "Of course I remember you. I always knew you were going to do great things. And I remember your brother too."

> You develop courage by doing the small things that take courage. Like not sitting in a room where racial pejoratives are used. Each of us should always be ready to stand up for what's right.

PLAYBOY: Tell us about your mother.

ANGELOU: My mother raised me and then she freed me. I remember when I was 17 and burning with rebellious passion, Vivian Baxter stood before me, a pretty yellow woman seven inches shorter than my six-foot bony frame. Her eyes were soft and her voice was brittle as she said, "You're determined to leave. Your mind's made up." I was her daughter, so whatever independence I inherited from her had been increased by living with her and watching her for the past four years. She declared, "You're leaving my house."

I collected myself and said, "Yes. I found a room."

"And you're taking the baby?"

"Yes."

She gave me a smile, half proud, half pitying. "All right. You're a woman. You don't have a husband, but you've got a three-month-old baby. I just want you to remember one thing. From the moment you leave this house, don't let anybody raise you. Every time you get into a relationship, you will have to make concessions, compromises, and there's nothing wrong with that. But keep in mind, Grandmother Henderson in Arkansas and I have given you every law you need to live

by—follow what's right. You've been raised."

PLAYBOY: And since that time?

ANGELOU: More than 50 years have passed. During those years I have loved and lost, raised my son, set up a few households and walked away from many. I have taken life as my mother gave it to me on that strange graduation day all those decades ago. When I have extended myself beyond my reach and come toppling humpty-dumpty down on my face in full view of a scornful world, I have returned to my mother to be liberated by her one more time.

PLAYBOY: It's been said that you've followed your heart to many misadventures.

ANGELOU: I have followed my love and had good times and crummy times. I'm very happy that I dared to love. One of the reasons older people are short-tempered and impatient with young people is that the older people didn't enjoy themselves when they were young. So when they see a young person enjoying herself or himself, they say, "Sit down, shut up, go in the corner." I feel just the opposite. I love to see young people enjoying themselves because I've really had a wonderful time myself.

PLAYBOY: How do you see your role now in life?

ANGELOU: I can answer you best with a wonderful spiritual, really a gospel song. [*singing*]

I want to live the life I sing about in my song /
I don't want to go to church on Sunday /
Go out, get drunk and talk about people on Monday /
I want to live the life I sing about in my song

I want to be present in my life. I want to be exactly what you see. That's what I want to do. I want to combat evil.

In 1957, Angelou danced professionally as part of the Caribbean Calypso Festival.

PLAYBOY: Like Malcolm X said, "by any means necessary"?

ANGELOU: That's a scary statement, "by any means necessary." That's as dangerous a statement as all grass is green, so everything that's green is grass. A lot of people say, "Well, I'm brutally honest." I mean, you don't have to be brutal to be honest. What are you really telling me when you say "by any means necessary"? Quite often one falls into the same role as the brute that you're opposing. And I don't want to do that.

I want to be in the good guy's camp. And if I'm just one good guy, and there are 5 billion bad guys, I still want to have the courage to be the good guy. If I'm one voice crying in the wilderness, that's what I want to do. As long as I live, I want to be the one to say, "Here am I." Again, a gospel song. I'm amazed at black people who were in chains and yokes and had no right to move one inch beyond the prescribed area. "If the Lord wants somebody, here am I, send me, I will go." I like that. It's so brave and noble of heart. I want to be able to say, "Yes, I'll go. I'll go."

PLAYBOY: What do you still want from life?

ANGELOU: I'm very keen to be a Christian. I'm always amazed when people walk up to me and say, "I'm a Christian." I always think, Already? Really? It's a lifetime pursuit. But as a Christian, I'd like to be hospitable and generous. And fair—not only fair but merciful and quick to forgive.

PLAYBOY: Do you prefer living in the South to the North?

ANGELOU: I love the rhythm of the South. I like the pace. I have an apartment in New York and I enjoy it because of my friends there, but New York is a big city, and you have to do it in your youth. I don't have to do that again.

PLAYBOY: Is there any adventure in life, any pursuit, that you haven't tried?

ANGELOU: Not that I wanted to, no. If you don't take chances, you get to die anyway. Why die without first living? I'm sure life loves the liver. You've got to be willing to take chances. That takes courage. People think that's something you're born with or you're not. That's ridiculous; you develop it, just as you develop biceps and triceps.

PLAYBOY: How would a person do that?

ANGELOU: You develop courage by doing the small things that take courage. Like not sitting in a room where racial pejoratives are used. Like not sitting in a room where gay people are being bashed. I won't do it. I just get up and leave.

PLAYBOY: There's no point confronting it or arguing?

ANGELOU: Oh, sometimes. It depends on the situation. Sometimes you can say, "Hey, everybody," and you knock heads together. Other times it doesn't behoove you to do that, and you don't even tell them why you're leaving. Say, "I'm wanted in Bangkok in about three hours. So excuse me."

PLAYBOY: You once stood up to a group of racists back in Stamps.

ANGELOU: Each of us should always be ready to stand up for what's right. Whether it's to a racist or somebody who looks down upon someone else because he's poor or because he has no education.

PLAYBOY: You have been everything from a madam to a streetcar conductor. Have you ever known anybody who has lived her life more fully than you have?

ANGELOU: I didn't know I had a choice.

PLAYBOY: Do you feel that this is our only time around?

ANGELOU: Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't. Sometimes I think this is a trip from which no traveler returns. And on the other hand I feel that I have come back—as something else.

PLAYBOY: What could you come back as? You've tried everything.

ANGELOU: Oh no, not everything. Stick around, though. I'm just getting started. ■

HARE FORCE ONE

BY LORRAINE BOISSONEAULT

The Playboy empire hit cruising altitude in the early 1970s with the *Big Bunny*, a private jetliner that embodied luxury and indulgence—and, on occasion, embraced charity

N950PB

Left: *Jet Bunnies received extensive flight-attendant training.* ***Above:*** *A DC-9 fan jet underwent considerable renovations to become the luxury vehicle Hefner had in mind.* ***Right:*** *Sumptuous fare and comfortable quarters were on display in this promotional image of the Big Bunny's interior.*

IT WAS THE FRIED CHICKEN that scared flight attendant Gwen Wong Wayne the most. Not the turbulence, or the passengers who drank one too many glasses of wine, but the dish she and other Jet Bunnies prepared from scratch for their boss, Hugh Hefner, on the *Big Bunny,* his personal plane. The recipe was simple: chicken pieces, a handful of flour, Lawry's seasoning salt, garlic powder and dried parsley, all shaken together in an air-sickness bag and then fried. The location—a tiny forward galley in a DC-9 jet flying at 30,000 feet and cruising at a speed of 565 miles an hour—was not. Decades after her stint in the skies, Wayne says she always prayed they wouldn't hit an air pocket that might jolt the plane and send hot oil spattering.

"He liked to eat certain things," Wayne remembers about Hefner, whose tastes, when it came to food, were famously consistent and unadventurous. Boxes of Twinkies were stashed so they'd never run out on long flights. A bottle of Pepsi had to be waiting for Hefner when he boarded (to be refreshed every hour) and a glass of cold milk served with his meal. Meal preparation was the only nerve-racking part for Wayne, a Playmate (April 1967) who had been working at the Los Angeles Playboy Club when she traded in her ears for wings and became a Jet Bunny.

"Was it a hard job? At times it was, but also it was something that was just...almost like you have to pinch yourself to know that this is real," Wayne says.

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Painted solid black with a white Rabbit Head logo on its tail fin, the *Big Bunny* was one of the most recognizable planes of its time. It shuttled Hefner and his coterie from Chicago to Los Angeles and across the Atlantic for excursions to Europe and Africa. It incited envy among other executive-jet owners. It acted as the brand's winged ambassador, spreading the message of lust and luxury. Behind all the opulence—and occasional charitable undertakings—a flight crew including a pilot, first officer, flight engineer and two to three Jet Bunnies like Wayne worked to keep passengers happy and flights safe and seamless.

The challenges of finding the perfect sky-high bachelor pad began almost as soon as Hefner expressed an interest in having a plane.

"One day in the late 1960s he came to me and said he wanted a large corporate jet," says Dick Rosenzweig, who was then an assistant and eventually became an executive vice president at Playboy Enterprises. Rosenzweig initially looked into the Lockheed JetStar, the largest corporate jet available at the time. But when he reported back on his extensive research, Hefner waved the suggestion away.

"He said to me, 'Oh no, that's not what I'm talking about. This is going to be a flying mansion. And I need a dance floor and a bedroom with a round bed. I need something with international capability,' " Rosenzweig says.

More searching turned up the McDonnell Douglas DC-9 fan jet. The aircraft manufacturer agreed to create a special model of the plane: a stretch version with extra fuel tanks that could take it across the Atlantic. Hefner approved the plane but wanted nothing to do with the standard two-aisle, 100-plus passenger configuration. He hired designers Daniel Czubak and Gus W. Kostopulos to create an aircraft every bit as lavish as his mansions.

"Through the use of soft, flowing contours, sculptured forms and controlled lighting, we are shaping the interior to eliminate the tunnel effect you now get in a standard aircraft," Czubak reported in 1968 after the plane was ordered.

But things didn't go quite as smoothly as the designer might have hoped. Fitting custom-made high-end furnishings and cutting-edge audiovisual equipment into a functioning mechanical package wasn't easy.

"As it was under construction, the FAA took a look at it and said, 'Wait a minute, this does not meet our specifications,' " Rosenzweig recalls. Everything that had been done

Far left: *The Big Bunny was a powerful marketing tool for Playboy Enterprises. Bunnies, including Gwen Wong Wayne at left, pose by the nose of the plane in a promotional image.* ***Left:*** *Bunnies unveil the Rabbit Head design on the plane's tail fin.* ***Above:*** *Walter Holmes (foreground) designed the sleek "wet look" uniforms Jet Bunnies were required to wear.*

to that point had to be ripped out, costing more time and money. From then on builders followed the precise weight and design restrictions set by the Federal Aviation Administration. Even the plane's unmistakable paint scheme and array of lights shining on the Rabbit Head design required approval. But the final result was well worth the effort.

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Taking its first test flight in February 1969, the *Big Bunny* debuted as the world's largest and costliest business aircraft, at 119 feet and $5.5 million (about $38 million today). Fewer than a dozen other people owned similarly large business jets at the time; their ranks included Howard Hughes, singer James Brown and MGM owner Kirk Kerkorian.

Everywhere it flew, the jet was instantly recognized and clamored over. Reporters invited aboard for promotional tours sipped drinks from crystal glassware and dined on Spanish prawns, oysters Rockefeller and sirloin steaks served on fine china. The plane was equipped with special ovens to cook roast beef and duckling, plus grills for crepes and waffles—not to mention fryers for the chicken. A fully stocked liquor cabinet ensured guests would stay well lubricated.

The sumptuousness extended far beyond the meals. The plane included movie projectors that showed films in CinemaScope. Seven built-in screens situated throughout the jet played color videotapes, at a time when only about 33 percent of households had color televisions. The *Big Bunny* included a discotheque dance floor (rarely used, according to Wayne), a lavatory with a full-length mirror, a seating area where the chairs could transform into comfortable sleeping areas and even a "sky phone" for making mid-flight calls.

The crowning glory was Hefner's private suite, complete with an elliptical bed covered in satin sheets, an electric blanket and a striped bedspread made of Tasmanian possum fur. His bathroom held a shower with two showerheads and recessed seating.

"The plane was really a very glamorous adventure for us," says Rosenzweig, who was a regular passenger. "There were other corporate jets, but they weren't like that."

Completing the tableau were the Jet Bunnies: trained flight attendants chosen from among the hundreds of women working as Bunnies in the Playboy clubs. They coordinated with the pilots—hired through an airline company—to comply with FAA regulations and to cater to their guests' every whim. In addition to passing flight-attendant training courses, the women followed stringent rules regarding their appearance and presentation. They dressed in Bond-girl-esque outfits designed by couturier Walter Holmes; with the exception of their regulation Jet Bunny watches, no jewelry was permitted, and wearing white scarves when greeting guests was required. Their hair was to be sleek, their makeup natural, their underwear black and their behavior amiable.

"If you go over five pounds above your ideal weight, you will automatically be suspended from flying until you have reached your ideal weight again," warned the 130-page Jet Bunny manual. "At no time can you display boredom or irritability. You must be, above all, the epitome of a charming, well-mannered young lady."

If the standards sound impossibly high, the women at least felt well compensated. For Wayne, being a Jet Bunny meant taking a break from the even more exhausting work of serving in a Playboy Club—and it came with the bonus of travel adventures. She remembers being a crew member on a two-and-a-half-month-long trip to Europe and Africa. Although she worked when the plane was in transit, her days and nights on the ground were filled with sightseeing; she and the other Jet Bunnies were invited to every exclusive club that Hefner's traveling party visited. She saw one of the Beatles in London, marveled at the Parthenon in Rome and dined on fresh fish in Kenya in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro.

"Every place we went, it was like something that you read about in books," Wayne says. "It was far more than I had expected, ever. It was the trip of a lifetime."

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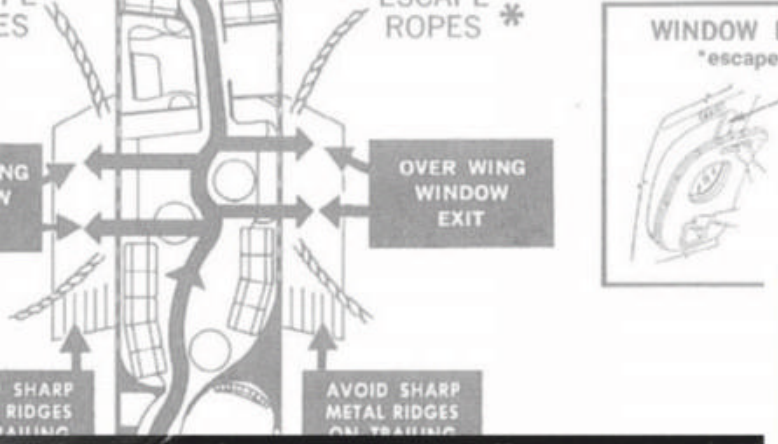
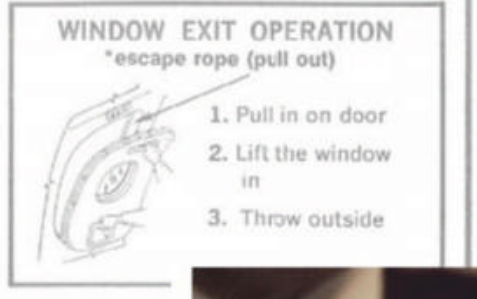
But the *Big Bunny* didn't just serve as a flying palace. It also extended the philanthropic





PLAYBOY DC-9 FAN JET

Operated by Ozark Airlines Inc.

SPECIAL PROCEDURES FOR EMERGENCIES

Left: *Jet Bunny Sharon Gwin tends to a child aboard the plane during Operation Babylift in 1975.* ***Above:*** *Cher chartered the plane for her concert tour with Sonny.* ***Right:*** *The Big Bunny is treated to a regal welcome in Rabat, Morocco, one port of call among many on Hugh Hefner's 1970 Africa trip.*

arm of the Playboy brand. This was achieved through various high-profile missions, beginning in July 1970 with the transport of a male gorilla named Jack. A resident of the Baltimore Zoo, Jack had been promised to the Phoenix Zoo as a breeding companion for its female gorilla. But when other methods of transportation fell through, actress Amanda Blake put a call through to Hefner to request a loan of the jet. He happily complied in the name of primate love.

"The flight was by no means the 'fun trip' the newspapers or persons might imagine. The whole thing was very last minute and hectic," Playboy vice president and promotion director Nelson Futch wrote to John Dante, another of Hefner's assistants, after the ape transfer had been completed. Futch praised the Jet Bunnies who worked on the flight for their ability to handle the situation with aplomb. "I am sure there are any number of young ladies around who would refuse to board the plane, even with the assurance that the gorilla would be 'sedated,' since such an undertaking had never occurred before."

In his tranquilized state, Jack spent the duration of the flight on Hefner's own bed and successfully arrived in Phoenix to meet his new mate.

Much more impactful was the *Big Bunny*'s involvement in what came to be known as Operation Babylift. The Vietnam War–era effort to bring orphans from the war-torn country to families in the United States required more planes than the military easily had at its disposal. Once again Hefner offered to provide assistance, this time at the behest of actor Yul Brynner. In April 1975 the plane ferried some 40 infants across the country, from San Francisco to Denver and then New York, with assistance from the nonprofit group Friends of Children.

"Each and every person on the plane worked so hard—it is a night I will long remember," wrote Constance Boll, director of Friends of Children, in a letter to the Chicago Playboy Club. "Our thanks to you and all the crew you rounded up who helped us move the babies a little closer to their new homes."

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When the jet wasn't busy ferrying Hefner between L.A. and Chicago, or transporting kids and wildlife, other celebrities occasionally leased it for their own travels. Elvis Presley took the *Big Bunny* on tour in the summer of 1974, and Sonny and Cher chartered it for their international tour. Other A-list passengers included Frank Sinatra, Tom Jones, Shel Silverstein, Roman Polanski and Rod Serling, creator of the *Twilight Zone,* who filmed aboard the plane.

"The plane was all part of the Playboy dream, just as the mansions were," Rosenzweig says. "There were people who thought, until Hef's passing, that the plane was still in the company."

Despite its comfort and allure, maintaining the jet grew too costly to justify after Hefner decided to make the Los Angeles Mansion his primary home in 1975. Around 90 percent of the flights had been between Chicago and L.A., Rosenzweig estimates, and Hefner was no longer making that trip on a regular basis. And so the *Big Bunny* was sold, first to Venezuela Airlines, then later to Aeromexico. It continued its service as a commercial aircraft—albeit without the black paint job—until 2004. After the plane languished for several years in disuse, its fuselage was finally donated to a park in Querétaro, Mexico in 2008.

The iconic plane and its sophisticated, proficient Jet Bunnies had helped Playboy Enterprises reach new heights. Long after the jet was grounded, the winged symbol of sex and prestige lives on as a reminder of the Playboy fantasy. ■

Welcome to HEF'S PARTY

On *Playboy After Dark*, the host with the most invited viewers into his (faux) home for intimate performances by the era's top entertainers

BY **STEVE PALOPOLI**

THE DOOR OF A BLACK LIMO opens, and the chauffeur beckons you inside. Suddenly you're rolling down Sunset Boulevard, city lights flashing outside as champagne flows in the backseat. A jazzy tune plays as your destination looms in the sleek, shiny cityscape—the penthouse of Playboy's Los Angeles headquarters. Elevator doors open to reveal a star-studded party in full swing, guests mingling, dancing and drinking.

An American playboy's fantasy come true? That's exactly what the opening sequence of Hugh Hefner's *Playboy After Dark* variety show sought to embody.

Celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, having run in syndication for two seasons, from 1969 to 1970, *Playboy After Dark* was a heady unraveling of the traditional talk show and variety formats. Each episode was structured as a party hosted by Hefner, at which musical guests, comedians, writers and celebrities of all stripes mingled with models and other stylish young people. Every party ended with a fade-out to a winking Rabbit, as if to say, "See you next time."

The idea for the show came about in 1966, when Playboy opened its London club. Hefner had been burying himself in writing the *Playboy Philosophy* series for the magazine, but a firsthand glimpse of the British scene changed everything.

"The miniskirt had just arrived; swinging London was really swinging," said Hefner in a 2006 interview with Bill Zehme. "I saw the future. I'd been writing about it in *The Playboy Philosophy* and making a case for the sexual revolution, and I felt it was time to come out from behind the desk once again and start living the life. So when I went back to Chicago, I stopped doing the editorial series right then and started making plans for the television show."

Five decades later, despite the show's brief run, it has become legendary in certain circles, enjoying a level of recognition that reaches beyond cult phenomenon without quite achieving mainstream awareness. An early performance by the Grateful Dead has made *Playboy After Dark* a fixture of Deadhead lore; that status was cemented in 2017 when the show was discussed at length in the exhaustive four-hour documentary about the band, *Long Strange Trip.*

It's not hard to see why. The 1969 segment not only showcases the Dead at their *Aoxomoxoa*-era best—performing "St. Stephen," "Mountains of the Moon" and "Turn on Your Love Light"—it also highlights the playful charm of a young Jerry Garcia in his interview segment with Hefner.

"I notice that with your own group, you've got kind of a stereo effect going on here with drums—two complete sets of drums and two drummers," Hefner says to the serape-wearing Garcia before the band plays. "Obviously for a purpose."

"Right," replies a smiling Garcia. "Mutual annihilation."

"I see. In other words, the guys kind of compete with one another?"

"Well, they more chase each other around. It's like the serpent that eats its own tail. And it goes round and round like that," Garcia says, twirling his finger. "If you can stand in between them, they make figure eights on their sides in your head."

With dialogue like that, it's easy to believe Grateful Dead drummer Bill Kreutzmann's claim in his 2015 autobiography, *Deal: My Three Decades of Drumming, Dreams and Drugs With the Grateful Dead,* that while taping that episode the band's sound engineer slipped some homemade acid into the on-set coffee.

That's coffee that Nanci Roberts very likely would have drunk. The former model and actress—who went on to be a successful Hollywood art director and production designer on shows like *Arrested Development* and films including the *Taken* series—was 18 when she was hired as an extra for *Playboy After Dark* and wound up appearing on all 52 episodes. A number of Los Angeles models circulated among the party guests on the show; one of them, Barbi Benton, would go on to be one of the most important women in Hefner's life.

The show's blend of high society and flower power could be disorienting, but Roberts doesn't recall anything becoming literally lysergic while filming with the Grateful Dead.

Previous page: *James Brown performs on a 1969 episode of Playboy After Dark.* ***Left:*** *Dancers get into the groove.* ***Right:*** *Barbi Benton on the Playboy After Dark set.*

"I don't remember anything like that," she says of the alleged LSD incident. "I was trying to think, Was there ever a show that was really odd and off? I don't know! A lot of people were a little bit out there anyhow."

The Dead weren't the only musical act that left an impression; in fact, the dozens of killer musical performances—especially from then up-and-coming rock bands like Deep Purple, Steppenwolf and the Grass Roots—might be *Playboy After Dark*'s most lasting legacy.

"For me, being a teenager in the 1960s and getting to see every great rock band—that was probably the greatest gift I ever got," says Roberts.

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Hefner's original television show, *Playboy's Penthouse,* which ran from 1959 to 1961, had stirred up controversy by inviting people of color to the party, and it wasn't shown in some markets because of it.

"It was very much like a real party at the

Mansion, so distinctions of race were simply not there. And in portions of the country, that was not acceptable," said Hefner about *Playboy's Penthouse*. "Segregation was still the way of things in major portions of the South. We broke that color line, and I'm proud that we did."

Though *Playboy After Dark* came a decade later, it was still far more racially integrated than most shows of its time. It featured performances from R&B and jazz greats including James Brown, Marvin Gaye, Smokey Robinson, Buddy Miles and Lou Rawls.

The show also drew from the folk explosion, with sets from the likes of Pete Seeger and Joan Baez. One of the most unexpected bookings was singing family the Cowsills, for which Roberts takes responsibility: She was engaged to lead singer Bob Cowsill.

Left: *The Grateful Dead, anchored by Jerry Garcia, playing a set still venerated by fans.* ***Right:*** *Tina Turner turns in a powerful rendition of "Proud Mary" on the show's second season.*

"That was a surprise for me. At the end of the show, they brought out the Cowsills, who would never have been on the show otherwise," she says. "We weren't really married yet, but we pretended to be. Our wedding was the week after the show ended."

Playboy After Dark also spotlighted comedians such as Bob Newhart, Mort Sahl (who was married to Playmate China Lee), Shari Lewis, Tommy Smothers and David Steinberg. Nick Ullett, who performed on the show as part of a British comedy duo with Tony Hendra (who would go on to play the band manager in *This Is Spinal Tap*), remembers how unusual the show's premise and set were. Host Hefner escorted the camera through the gathering, chatting with the celebrity guests and introducing them to one another. The absence of a stage made the set unlike other productions.

"The concept behind the show was really instead of simply putting the talent on stage and having you watch it from an audience, we turned it into a party," Hefner said.

Musicians had their band setup, or at least a piano to lean on, but when it was a comedian's turn, he or she would simply start their act in the middle of the room.

"It was interesting, because you didn't perform to an audience; you performed to the people around you," says Ullett. "It was a different look, and it had a different feel."

Designed to appear as if it were shot in the luxe bachelor-pad penthouse of the Playboy building at Sunset and Alta Loma, which housed a Playboy Club at the time, the first season of *Playboy After Dark* was actually shot on a soundstage on the CBS lot, the set a remodeled version of the one from *Playboy's Penthouse*. The second season of *Playboy After Dark* was shot at the KTLA studio on Sunset.

The real Playboy building did get some use—after the tapings. "Every time we would wrap a show, Hef would have a big party at the penthouse," says Roberts. "All the guests would show up, and all the kids from the show, and anybody else who wanted to drop in who was somebody. It was definitely the place to be."

That electric ambience extended beyond Playboy's properties. Ullett remembers one memorable night after taping an episode that also featured musician Jimmy Webb.

"Tony and I went back to Jimmy Webb's place—he was living off Hollywood Boulevard. We sang and smoked dope and hung out for a long fucking time. That atmosphere engendered that sort of thing," says Ullett. "To give Hefner credit, he had complete confidence in himself and his vision. There wasn't another talk show around like that. I mean, this was a party."

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Fifty years later, the ambition and scope of the show remain impressive. In one episode, Hefner sits across a coffee table from journalist George Plimpton—who would later pen several PLAYBOY pieces, including an essay on attempting to be a Playmate photographer—and talks to him about his unorthodox research style. In another, he's chatting with comic Sid Caesar, who suddenly points out a piece of art by Everett Greenbaum, launching Hef into a tangent on kinetic sculpture. With Tommy Smothers he discusses the increasingly conservative political atmosphere in the U.S., which Hefner calls "frightening." He also seems to have anticipated television's sketch-comedy revolution, introducing audiences to Chicago's Second City improv troupe years before *Saturday Night Live*.

Through it all, Hefner plays the role of consummate host, always the straight man to his guests, endlessly solicitous.

"Well, it wasn't really a role," says Roberts. "That was him. He was very, very smart, and he was incredibly interested in everyone and in everything."

"He loved the whole idea of celebrities," says Ullett. "But he was very generous, and he didn't try to hog the limelight at all. He'd say, 'Well, look who we've got here!' And then he'd let them just go."

For Hefner, *Playboy After Dark* was a deeply personal project. Having grown up in the Midwest in a strict household, he was intoxicated by stories of the Roaring '20s and longed to be swept up in the Jazz Age. "Throughout my life, both in the television shows and also life at the Mansion, parties really are thematic," Hefner said. "It's a symbolic way of celebrating life, of saying 'We're just here for a little while; let's make the most of it.' " And the Rabbit winked. ■

Marilyn Cole

THE ONE AND ONLY BRITISH PLAYMATE OF THE YEAR ON LEAVING HOME, BUILDING A CAREER AND BEING THE FIRST TO BARE IT ALL

AS TOLD TO ANNA DEL GAIZO

I GREW UP IN PORTSMOUTH, a historic port city in the south of England. By the time I was 16, I couldn't wait to leave school and earn money. In my family it was tradition to work for either the Civil Service or the bank—a respectable office job. I went into the Ministry of Defense and worked in the dockyard as a clerk and then at a bank. Then I broke the family mold.

A friend had moved to London. She said, "There's this place called the Playboy Club. All you have to do is smile and you make lots of money!" Now, this ended up being far from the truth. I wrote the Playboy Club in London, and they replied with a typed letter on headed notepaper: "Please come in for an interview." The only requirement? Bring a bikini.

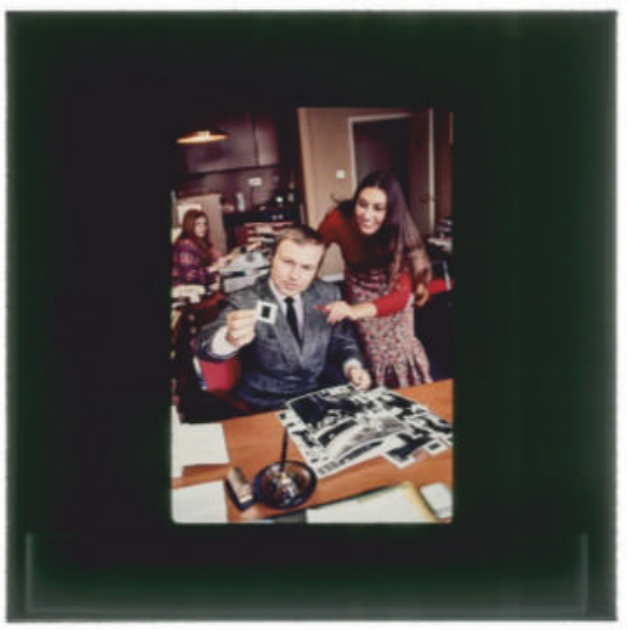
So I left my parents' little house and got on the train with a cooked chicken and a loaf of bread in my handbag that my mum had given me. I was 21.

I walked in for my interview and saw this glossy blonde apparition. Her name was Lindy, and she was the Bunny mother. Her hair was swept up; her eyelashes were perfect; her lips were lacquered. My first reaction was, Girls in Portsmouth don't look like this. To be hired as a Bunny was like being in the army: the precision, the detail. It required a healthy discipline, and either you had it or you didn't.

I was still in training when I met my future husband, Victor Lownes. He was a Playboy executive. We were standing dutifully in line, waiting for Frank Habicht, the resident photographer, to take our photos, when this whirlwind, this force of nature appeared. He said to the photographer, "Ask this girl if she's ever done any beauty work." He didn't talk to me. "No, I haven't," I said. Victor said, "Well, test her for Playmate," and walked out. Frank took me aside. "You'll earn $5,000 for one photograph." That was it for me. I wasn't stupid. I knew PLAYBOY magazine and knew I'd been singled out.

Days later a chauffeur picked up Frank and me in a silver Cadillac convertible with red leather seats. I didn't even ask where we were going. It happened to be Victor's house, but he left as we arrived.

An obvious question is "How did you feel about taking off your clothes?" We didn't discuss it. I was committed. I knew it was professional. I was ushered to the dressing room and given a robe. I said to myself, Okay, you go in as Marilyn Cole and you come out as somebody else! I was suddenly a model and an exhibitionist. But I was never inhibited. You take off your clothes and then you have to act. I came out of the bathroom hoping the photographer would be blown away. Luckily, Frank looked very pleased. "Stand by that bookcase," he said. It was near a window, so there was natural light. Later on, Hugh Hefner kept coming back to that shot, saying, "This is what I want." Eight months later, Alexas Urba



had to re-create the bookcase setup in Chicago, and that became my Centerfold photo.

But before going to the States, I needed my passport, which was back home in Portsmouth. I whizzed into the house and said, "I have to go to Chicago! They're going to photograph me for the magazine."

"Oh no," my mum said. "It's one of *those* magazines."

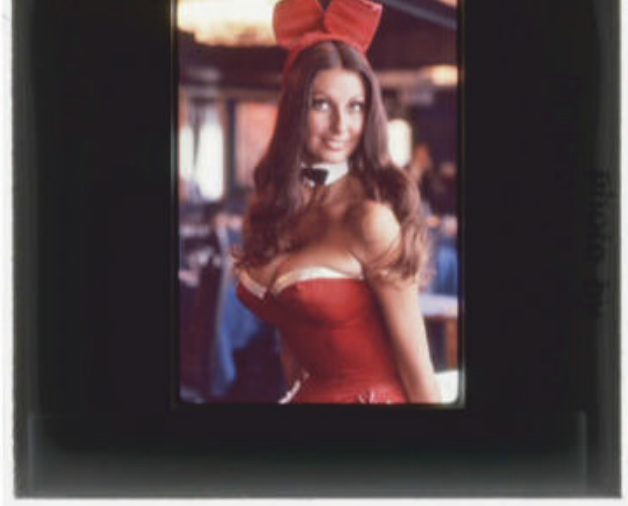
"Yes. But don't worry, Mum, they drape you."

Off I went to the Playboy Mansion. About two months later I had to show my parents the Polaroid of me standing completely naked, no draping. Nobody had necessarily intended full nudity when we went into the shoot, but it evolved as a business decision. The dilemma was to go pubic or not. Hefner considered himself a romantic, but it was all about timing. That initial black-and-white test shot we'd taken in London had been haunting him, and he decided it could be PLAYBOY's first foray into full frontal.

I said to my parents, "I'm going to be Miss January 1972." My mom looked at the Polaroid and said, "Well, doesn't your hair look nice." My father's response: "This is like a Rubens." He saved me in that moment. Other Playmates had parents who wouldn't talk to them.

I started dating Victor seriously in late 1971; we married in 1984. You might call it a love story. We were at the Playboy Club in London when I found out I'd won Playmate of the Year 1973. I gasped. My first thought was, Another $5,000—bring it on! There was a lot of tabloid attention. The British press loved that a working-class girl from Portsmouth had gone to America and had success in PLAYBOY. Today I work as a journalist.

When I walked into the Playboy Club, I knew I'd found my people. What I didn't know was how much it would change my life. There had always been something in me that wouldn't be confined by society's expectations. No one was going to stop me. ■



Previous spread: *"Alexas Urba shot me on Crete draped in just a piece of chiffon," says Cole. "How many people can say they've stood naked in the cave where, according to Greek mythology, Zeus was born?"* ***Opposite page, far left:*** *"I had a swift and real sense of the hugely talented, extraordinary, creative people I had landed amongst at Playboy. I am very privileged and proud to be a part of all that."* ***Opposite page, bottom right:*** *Cole and Victor Lownes at the Playmate of the Year luncheon in London.* ***Left and right:*** *Cole was training for her job as a Bunny at the London Playboy Club when she was asked to do a test shoot to become a Playmate. "My red velvet outfit trimmed in gold was our Reception Bunny costume. The blue and silver was the VIP restaurant costume."* ***Below:*** *"My hair and makeup on these shoots were both natural, as in no professional help. It was always the photographer and me working together."*

Schuster
McGraw-Hill
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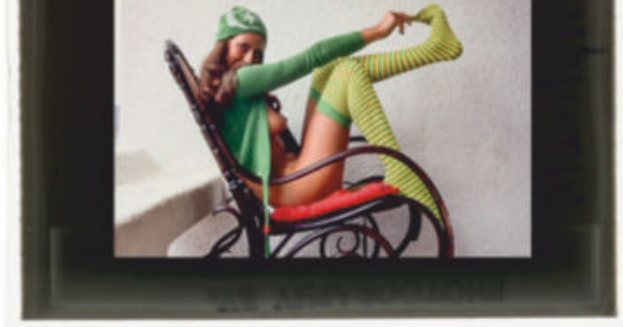
Gablik
Magritte
New York Graphic Society
DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN BIOGRAPHY

Opposite page: *Cole's January 1972 Centerfold was Playboy's "first foray into full frontal." She recalls of the August shoot: "It was very hot when we shot the Centerfold. We had to keep taking breaks, as the fire was constantly being stoked to get the flames just right."*

Above: *Cole's test photos by Frank Habicht. "These early shots mark the first time I was naked in front of a camera. We were in Victor's elegant townhouse in Connaught Square, London. He had great, eclectic taste. I posed amongst custom-made Italian furniture and fantastic paintings by the likes of Francis Bacon, Egon Schiele and Picasso. The photos are evocative, with a real 1970s vibe."* ***Left and right:*** *Outtakes from Cole's Playmate of the Year photo shoot.*



Left: *More memorable outtakes from Cole's PMOY shoot.* ***Right:*** *"This was taken on the balcony outside my room in Greece. Alexas loved to shoot in daylight, so there I was in an unmade bed, as though having slept outside."* ***Below:*** *"The 'Playmate Pink' car was my prize as Playmate of the Year 1973. The car and I were flown to Miami Beach for that single shot."* ***Opposite page:*** *"Alexas saw us all as goddesses, whether in Greece or elsewhere. I'm wearing a vintage Moroccan dress along with a necklace of antique coins—all from the casbah. I loved collecting exotic jewelry and clothes on my travels."*

The KING *of* FREE SPEECH

LENNY BRUCE TRANSFORMED STAND-UP COMEDY INTO A VEHICLE FOR SHARP SOCIAL COMMENTARY—AND PAID THE PRICE FOR HIS BOLDNESS

BY **SASCHA COHEN**

THE FIRST TIME COMEDIAN

Lenny Bruce was booked on obscenity charges, it was for saying the word *cocksucker* onstage in San Francisco in 1961. The second time was in Los Angeles, and the words in question included *schmuck* and *motherfucker*. The next time: *tits* and *balls* in Chicago. And the final time, the one that ultimately turned the bohemian provocateur into a martyr to free speech, was in 1964 at Cafe Au Go Go in Greenwich Village. Bruce joked about sex acts with animals, among other things, as undercover agents in the audience took notes on his material. The district attorney's office decided to make an example out of him, beginning one of the most notorious obscenity trials in U.S. history.

Despite the best efforts of his lawyers (who were First Amendment experts) and support from public intellectuals including James Baldwin, Susan Sontag and Gore Vidal (who, along with dozens of others, signed a petition condemning the arrest), Bruce was found guilty and sentenced to four months at Rikers Island, the infamous New York City jail. The comedian, already on a downward spiral after years of police harassment and now banned from performing on many stages, descended into self-destruction. He died of a morphine overdose in Hollywood in 1966 while his case was out on appeal. In one last indignity, the police photographed his naked body posed on the toilet. He was 40 years old.

Although Bruce's legacy as a philosophical

"LENNY FOUGHT FOR THE RIGHTS THAT WE TAKE FOR GRANTED NOW."

Left: *Bruce was searched by a policeman and arrested on charges of obscenity during a 1961 performance in California.* ***Above:*** *An undated photo of the comedian.* ***Middle right:*** *Bruce appeared, along with Nat King Cole, as a guest on a 1959 episode of Hugh Hefner's first television show, Playboy's Penthouse.* ***Lower right:*** *Using shocking language in his act was one way that Bruce tried to make a point.*

genius, hipster shaman and truth-teller has been enshrined in late–20th century American culture, from Bob Dylan lyrics to Beat poetry to the work of comedic successors like George Carlin, he hasn't been in the news much since 2003, when New York governor George Pataki granted him a posthumous pardon. But lately there has been something of a Lenny Bruce resurgence. The Emmy-winning Amazon series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel,* about an Upper West Side housewife striving to be a stand-up in the late 1950s, features a Lenny Bruce character. And the one-man show *I'm Not a Comedian...I'm Lenny Bruce* recently opened off Broadway after a successful run in Los Angeles.

"I'm so glad that people are discussing him again," says actor Ronnie Marmo, who wrote and stars in the play. "Lenny fought for the rights that we love and take for granted now. He believed, in a very hopeful, naive way, that he was going to be heard."

Bruce was both ambitious and ahead of his time. Early in his career, the media presented him as a law-breaking lowlife obsessed with dirty words. But Bruce had a lofty goal, Marmo says: holding a mirror up to society. That meant drawing attention to America's darker, uglier impulses—something the mainstream wasn't ready to accept. *Time* magazine famously described Bruce as "sick," a label that stuck for years. To this, the comic responded, "The world is sick, and I'm the doctor. I'm a surgeon with a scalpel for false values."

"Certain things back in the day just weren't said," says Bruce's daughter, Kitty, about her father's bold observations on racism and religious and political hypocrisy. "The intent of the word, what's behind it, makes a big difference."

Bruce used vulgarities strategically; there was an objective behind his shocking language. In one famous bit, he enumerated racial slurs for blacks, Jews, Italians, Mexicans, Poles and Irish people. "It's the suppression of the word that gives it the power, the violence, the viciousness," he then explained. To freely speak such epithets until they lose all meaning would create a better world, he insisted.

It is perhaps not surprising that one boundary-pushing pioneer fascinated another. Bruce first caught the attention of PLAYBOY publisher Hugh Hefner in 1958, during a set at Ann's 440 in San Francisco. An immediate fan of the comic's jazz-inflected urban style, Hefner arranged a gig for Bruce at the Cloister in Chicago. From that point on, Hefner aided Bruce's career when he could, featuring him as a guest on a 1959 episode of *Playboy's Penthouse* and several years later serializing his autobiography, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People,* in the magazine. After Bruce professed in a letter to being "dreadfully poor," Hefner offered him $500 to help fight his New York conviction. The men were brothers in arms in the war on censorship; Hefner had faced (and beaten) obscenity charges in 1963.

"The point is not whether any one of us agrees with all, or any part of, what Bruce has to say, but whether a free society can long remain free if we suppress the expression of all ideas that are objectionable to a few or to many," Hefner once wrote. Following Bruce's unexpected early death, PLAYBOY extolled him as a hero, with writer Dick Schaap perfectly memorializing the groundbreaking comedian: "One last four-letter word for Lenny: Dead. At 40. *That's* obscene." ■

What I Learned From Playmates

A FORMER *PLAYBOY* EDITOR SHARES SOME OF THE WISDOM HE ACCRUED OVER YEARS OF CONVERSATIONS WITH CENTERFOLD SUBJECTS

BY **JAMES R. PETERSEN**

I STARTED WORKING AT PLAYBOY magazine in 1973 at the age of 25. As the youngest editor, the low man on the totem pole, I inherited the job no one wanted: writing "girl copy"—the stories that accompany the Centerfolds. For a decade or so I interviewed the Playmates, meeting them for lunch or dinner in fancy restaurants, dark bars, beer gardens, tiny apartments, coffee shops—all expenses paid. In what world could this possibly be considered grunt work instead of a dream job? Well, if you were a serious journalist—as PLAYBOY editors often liked to think of themselves—then interviewing Jimmy Carter for the November 1976 issue, not cover girl Playmate Patti McGuire, was the plummier assignment.

I viewed the girls as slightly younger versions of myself. We faced the same culture, the tumult of the sexual revolution, and we were making it up as we went along. They were rebels, willing to put themselves in front of the world without shame. And they taught me a lot.

I learned to listen. (Try it sometime.) For many of these young women, I was the first man—perhaps even the first person—to be deeply curious about them, who wanted to know who they were, what they thought. Who asked sincere questions, who took notes. I found that when your subject sees you writing something down, she begins to believe that what she says counts. (It works on men too.)

I learned that beauty could be a curse. The world reacts to you whether or not you are ready. The same wave of hormones that turns girls into women turns some boys into assholes, future Supreme Court justices and presidents. High school jocks thought they deserved the cheerleaders. More than one jerk had said to a girl, "You are not Playmate material." I was surprised by the number of models who told me they were posing nude to get revenge.

I learned what women looked for in a man—or at least one woman in particular. "I want King Kong," she told me, "the black-and-white King Kong, the one who climbs up the Empire State Building looking for Fay Wray, reaches through a window, pulls out a screaming woman, sniffs her, then tosses her over his shoulder to her death because she's not 'the One.' " In other words, her message to suitors was: Know what you want and accept no substitutes.

I learned the full depth of love, of courage, of loss. One Playmate had just returned from a heartbreaking journey. Her brother had died and she'd gone to retrieve his body. She looked at the job the funeral home had done and said, "That's not my brother." She asked for makeup and worked on her brother's face until he was the boy she remembered, the boy her parents would recognize. That story didn't make it into the magazine article, but it changed my heart. Imagine putting aside your grief to perform that act of love.

I learned how to approach a beautiful woman. One of the editors I worked with said her brother had always wanted to meet a Playmate; would I mind if he came along on an interview? The three of us met at a power restaurant in Washington, D.C. The brother made the reservation, dealt elegantly with the staff and listened quietly throughout the interview. At the end, he slid his card across the table and said to the Playmate, "In a few months the whole world will be hitting on you. If you ever need to talk to someone, I'm available." She called that weekend. They went to Europe for a couple of weeks, were married by the end of the month and had started a family before the magazine came out. The lesson was clear: Let the woman make the first move.

During my time producing Centerfold copy in the 1970s and early 1980s, some feminists argued that the magazine reduced Playmates to mere sex objects, that we presented the women in our pages as being all the same. That could not have been further from the truth. My job, after all, was to discover the individual, to celebrate the person. The magazine let the Centerfolds tell their own stories, in their own voice, using me as a medium. Some spoke in a shy whisper, others with a defiant audacity. These women had turned away from their mothers' scripts—housewife, secretary, teacher—which took courage and confidence. They would make their own way, thank you. You didn't have to burn a bra if you weren't wearing one to begin with.

I heard academics even wrote doctoral theses about the Centerfold stories. My copy! One Playmate had brought me home to her apartment, where she kept a stash of a certain controlled substance that she thought might make her more articulate. But she had locked herself out of her place. I helped her take out a screen and open the window, and I watched her crawl through the opening, blue-jeaned ass in the air. I started my article with that image. One scholar wrote a whole thesis based on that paragraph, saying it demonstrated PLAYBOY's attempt to wed the furtive, the criminal and the forbidden with the image of the girl next door in order to heighten the sexual. No. She had just misplaced her keys.

Eventually I moved on to other assignments at the magazine, and younger editors took over the task of interviewing up-and-coming Centerfolds. The Playmates had given me an uncommon education, and I had graduated. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY **SPIROS HALARIS**

PLAYBOY
YOU! BE 21 TO ENTER

CLASSIC

"I tell you, by the time I've finished, Mount Rushmore will be forgotten."

"Uh, some of the women were wondering if you couldn't include something about equal rights...."

"Madam, I would like to tell you in all sincerity and with great respect that I'm selling knockers."

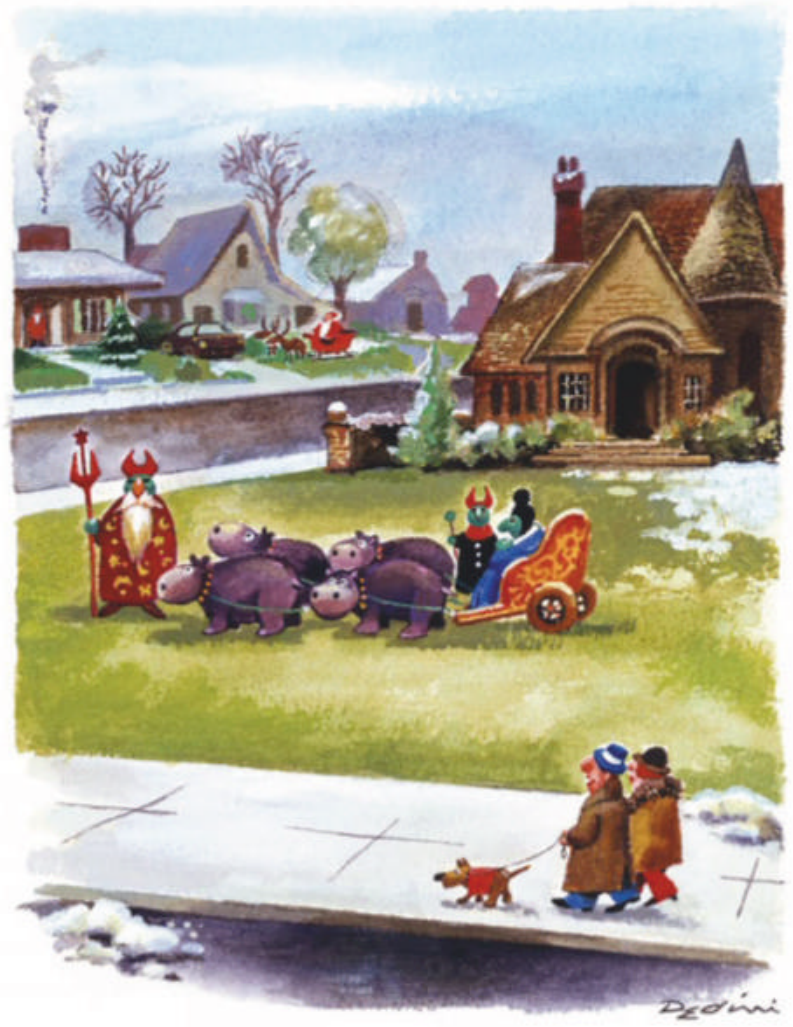
"Well, we feel that what three people do in the privacy of their own bedroom is their business and no one else's...."

CARTOONS

"Winter has come, babe. Time to cover it all up until next summer."

"My son, the abortionist."

"I always thought they flew South!"



"Incidentally, what religion are the Davidsons?"

Vintage Advisor

Good advice is timeless, so we called on our Advisor to revisit a question of eternal interest (one a reader asked in 1975): how to keep a woman's attention in bed

FROM THE JULY 1975 PLAYBOY

Have you ever noticed how hard it is for some women to concentrate on sex? My girlfriend has the opposite of a one-track mind—she can get derailed by noisy neighbors, unfinished chores or the proverbial bread crumbs in bed. Once she loses her momentum, it takes her a while to get started again and, frankly, I can't always postpone my own pleasure for that long. Is her wandering attention a sign that she is inhibited or that she just isn't interested?—E.Y., Portland, Oregon

The man who said don't eat crackers in bed never dated anyone from Georgia, but he did have a point—possibly the same one made by the grim tale "The Princess and the Pea." Mistresses on mattresses are easily distracted during sex. Psychologists may see the evasive action as an "anxiety-motivated defense" or a "culturally induced inhibition," but Kinsey suggested that such behavior goes beyond the bedroom: "Cheese crumbs spread in front of a copulating pair of rats may distract the female but not the male.... When cattle are interrupted during coitus, it is the cow that is more likely to be disturbed, while the bull may try to continue with coitus." Furthermore, female cats have been known to investigate mouse holes during intercourse. (We had a partner who used to do that—damn irritating, but new baseboards broke her of the habit.) Many women rate "privacy and freedom from intrusion" second only to "quality of relationship with partner" as a factor in their sexual satisfaction. Bear that in mind and find an appropriate setting for your next tryst (bank vaults and fallout shelters are great favorites). Also, you may find that if your girlfriend concentrates on something—music or an erotic fantasy—she can "distract the distracter" and mainline on the cannonball express.

OUR ADVISOR REFLECTS

Omnipresent smartphones, social media, e-mail, internet—we have a lot more to be distracted by today than we did in 1975. Frequently our minds are elsewhere, focused on just about everything besides what we're actually doing—even when we're engaging in the most intimate things possible.

Personally, I've never noticed a woman's attention wandering during sex (then again, I've slept with only a handful of women). I admit that I've occasionally found myself distracted during sex with men—suddenly contemplating the general absurdity of existence, trying not to laugh when my partner makes that weird noise or noticing my six-pound Brussels Griffon staring at me from inches away with judgment in his eyes—but then I'm right back in the moment, absorbed in the throes of passion and racking up orgasms.

What makes one go from fully engaged to sidetracked by the proverbial cheese crumb? I turned to an expert to find out. "If you're going to have sex, you may as well show up for it. It's not sufficient for your body to just go through the motions," says psychologist Lori Brotto, who literally wrote the book on the topic: *Better Sex Through Mindfulness.* "If it's not satisfying, it makes sense that you'll lose interest. It doesn't mean you're losing interest in sex. It means you're losing interest in the sex you're having." Ideally, sex is a permeating and immersive experience, with mind and body working in unison. Just as communication is essential to a successful long-term relationship, so too is a figurative dialogue between your brain and body. If one is not engaged, the other will check out too. Plenty of guys worry about how they look mid-thrust, but women are more prone to anxiety than men are and have higher instances of depression and lower rates of desire. It's no surprise that these issues slip between the sheets in the form of distraction.

How to quell our restless minds, if only for a solid seven minutes? The better you get at compartmentalizing, the better sex you'll have.

"Science tells us mindfulness is the most powerful way of cultivating sexual desire in people," says Brotto. In other words, you can meditate your way to better banging. If you or your partner is having trouble being in the moment, pick a time to practice meditation for 10 or 15 minutes every day. Apps like Headspace or Calm can help guide your progress; for the unplugged version, try a meditation class. The important thing is to work toward creating the right mind-set to enjoy and find pleasure in sex as it's taking place.

Still worried your partner may have lost interest in you? Begin a conversation with her and talk it out. This is a chance to examine your relationship, in bed and as a whole. Just as in 1975, studies still show that relationship quality has a major impact on a woman's sexual function, and in solid relationships, people talk. They talk about sex, from favorite fantasies to potential fetishes to specific proclivities and preferences. (Could you write a thesis on her orgasms? If not, do your research. Thoroughly.) They also talk about everything else, including banal things such as who does what housework. If a happy relationship is the ultimate goal, perhaps you should take it upon yourself to tell the neighbors to keep it down. Better yet, help out more with those chores. She's picking up on your energy as much as you're noticing hers, so make an effort to set the right tone and be as attentive as possible. Now *that's* advice to last the ages.—*Anna del Gaizo*

RATIFY THE SEX AMENDMENT.

THE HUMAN CAMPAIGN

THEHUMANCAMPAIGN.ORG

MANHATTAN, EARLY 1960s

Celebrating the Chinese New Year at the New York Playboy Club.

SAM HARRIS **TARAJI P. HENSON**

BLAISE CEPIS VENDELA

MEGAN MOORE **MIKI HAMANO**

ROXANE GAY SASHA SAMSONOVA

TREVOR PAGLEN **ÉMIR SHIRO**

PAUL W. DOWNS JANICE GRIFFITH

STORMY DANIELS **EZRA MILLER**

CHUCK PALAHNIUK SCOTT DIKKERS

DRAKEO THE RULER **RYAN PFLUGER**

ERIC POWELL MARILYN COLE

MAYA ANGELOU **EDWIDGE DANTICAT**